

Who is this?

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Matthew 21:1-11

Last week the Principal Clerk of the General Assembly issued a letter to Ministers, and other Church workers, that we have to carry around with us when we are going about our Church work – at this time primarily to take funerals – just in case we are stopped by the Police who want to know who we are and what we're up to! I would have thought a dog collar would have been a clue, but just in case, I now have a letter to prove who I am.

“The funeral in 2011 of Otto von Habsburg, the last heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, took place in Vienna. In the tradition of Habsburg funerals when his body arrived at the Capuchin church to be interred the doors were found shut. The herald knocked on the door. A monk from behind the doors asked: “Who demands entre?” The herald read out the titles of the deceased: ‘Otto of Austria; former Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary; Prince Royal of Hungary and Bohemia, of Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Galicia, Lodmeria, and Illyria; Grand Duke of Tuscany and Cracow; Duke of Lorraine, of Salzburg, Styria, Carinthia, Carniola and Bukowina; Grand Prince of Siebenbürgen, Margrave of Moravia; Duke of Silesia, Modena, Parma, Pacenza, Gustalla, Auschwitz and of Habsburg and Tyrol, of Kyburg, Gorizia and Gradisca; Prince of Trent and Brixen and so on.’ At the end the monks said: ‘We know him not.’ The herald knocked again: “Who demands entry?” came the voice. “Dr Otto von Habsburg.” “We know him not.” A third knock. ‘Who demands entry?’ ‘A sinner in need of God’s mercy.’ ‘Him we know,’ said the monk, and the doors were opened.”ⁱ

When Jesus of Nazareth came up from Bethany, and then on from Bethphage, and down the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, surrounded by Palm waving, COVID-19 regulation-breaking crowds, the whole city was in turmoil and asked, “Who is this?” they asked.

“Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the early 30s AD. One from the east largely composing of peasants, following a certain Jesus from Galilee riding a donkey down the Mount of Olives. On the opposite side of the city, from the west approaches the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, entering the city on a war horse at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. He has come from Caesarea Maritima for the purpose of maintaining law and order during the potentially tumultuous days of the Jewish festival of Passover.

Pilate was probably better known, at least to the people of Jerusalem. But some would have known full-well Who this Jesus of Nazareth was. He'd been to the city before. Stories had been circulating about Him. The Pharisees were on His case. They might not know exactly Who Jesus was, but they knew what He was. A threat, a destabiling influence in an already volatile time. Romans were around, Romans were watching, and the slightest hint of a Jewish revolt and they'd intervene and crush it, as they had done before.

There's an interesting echo of the Christmas story on Palm Sunday. At the start of Matthew's Gospel, when the Wise Men came from the East, trying to find the One born to be King of the Jews, we hear that Herod was troubled, and the whole city of Jerusalem with him. Now, on Palm Sunday, the whole city is shaken again as the adult Jesus enters in royal procession. It's the same word used again for the shaking of Jerusalem when Jesus breathes His last on the cross on Good Friday, and again on Easter Sunday when the guards at the tomb behold an angel. Who is this? One Whose birth, life, death and resurrection comes to shake the world, and save it. Hosanna! One Whose coming signals something astonishing, hopeful and frightening is happening. Tectonic plates of doubt and faith are shifting. Once again, the world has to make up its mind about Jesus, and we are brought to ask the same question of ourselves.

Who is this Jesus, and what difference does He make, not then, but now; not for them, but for us. Who is Jesus' is not a question whose answer is only for religious leaders and teachers; it is one for everyone. In fact, in the Palm Sunday story, it is the crowd following Jesus who give the answer. He's Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. He is a prophet, the One Who has come to the

world to tell some home truths, and to ask some fundamental questions, and to look us straight in the eye, and to ask us what we, in our time, are going to do about Him, with Him, for Him.

Jesus isn't riding into our city on a donkey today, and certainly there shouldn't be any crowds gathering, whatever the weather. So how are people going to encounter Jesus now? When they come to us, as many might, asking, "Who is this?" what will we say?

Over these last days I look again and again at the acts of kindness and generosity that have been spilling out into our community and world. Sure, there are bad things, selfish people, thoughtless actions. But I am not alone in noticing how, when push has come to shove, people have rallied around. It's early days yet I know, but I hope and pray that what we are seeing, whether it is faith-based or not, is a recalibration of our society. We are finding out who our neighbours are. We are finding out who we are in this most terrible of times. In a notification I received from our MSP, I noted that out of ten local groups and organisations offering help and support, at least eight of them were churches. It goes far beyond churches, but we are there, playing our part, with the rest. And beyond the organised things, there are the neighbourhood things that are being done quietly and kindly by so many of you. On Thursday we applauded NHS, care staff, shop workers, lorry drivers, teachers, the Police and Fire crews and others who steadily keep the country ticking over and safe and supplied. It's very strange how so many of the Key Workers we are indebted to and reliant upon at this moment of crisis, are also amongst the lowest paid in our society! That needs sorting out.

But today, I applaud you, playing your part in so many different ways for the people around you. The Church building maybe closed, but the Church is open – you – out there – in your street – in your community – making that difference. Praying, phoning, shopping, collecting, waving, remembering. Thank you.

Whilst we are waiting for the world to begin again, the Church, the people of faith, with others, have already started. The question today may be 'Who is this?' – it's Jesus. But there's another question: 'who are we?' We are the friends of Jesus, doing what Jesus would do in this time of crisis. And I bless you all for doing what you can today, until we meet again.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Mark Oakley, *By Way of the Heart*, pps125-126