

BLESSED IS THE KING WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD

Zechariah 9. 9 – 12

Philippians 2. 5-11

Luke 19. 28-40

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

It's the week of Passover, and Jerusalem is very, very crowded. Approximately two million Jews have come from all over the then-known world to "Jeru-shalem", the City of Peace, the Holy City, to celebrate this important religious festival commemorating the Exodus of ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

From Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast, Pilate, the Roman governor enters Jerusalem from the western side. He is accompanied by his imperial cavalry and foot soldiers, who have come to reinforce the garrison on the Temple Mount. It's Passover you see, and you never know what might happen. During a religious holiday like this, Jewish expectations are high, and it's very possible that the more radical Jewish Zealots¹ might decide to gather their forces against the Romans.

As Pilate enters Jerusalem, he does so with pomp and power. We can imagine the weapons, the helmets, the golden eagles mounted on poles, the metal and gold armour flashing in the sun, the pounding of horses' hooves, the marching of feet, the beating of drums and the swirling of dust. The imperial cavalry and foot soldiers are an impressive display of military might.

¹ The Jewish Zealots were right-wing extremists. They believed that the rule of God was to be set up by the violent and military overthrow of the Romans. The Zealots believed that allegiance was shown to God by a refusal to pay taxes to the Romans, a refusal to speak Greek, and a refusal to acknowledge Caesar as Lord. It was the Zealots' hope that Jesus, who had the power to heal the blind and to raise the dead, would use this same miraculous power to drive out the Roman legions.

Yet on the other side of Jerusalem, we see a very different parade. Coming from the southeast, from Bethphage,² is another procession. There are no strong and spirited war horses in this parade. There is no pomp and pageantry. There are no swords, and there is no armour. As we look at this scene, we might be tempted to think that this procession has not been thought through and planned, like Pilate's. And yet nothing has been left to chance, and nothing is accidental. The person who planned this parade has paid attention to, and is *in control of* every detail. The fact that there is a donkey and her colt is terribly significant.

Any Jew who saw them would immediately remember the words of the prophet Zechariah, who had written very specifically five hundred years earlier about the coming of Zion's king into the Holy City. The donkey and her colt³ were the surprising but strong and powerful signs of majesty. The one who would come into Jerusalem on a colt would be none other than the king of David's line,⁴ the long-awaited Anointed One, the Messiah. Yes, these prophetic words were ones that people memorised. They were words that brought tears to the eyes and joyful longing to the heart. It is easy for us to understand why the Jews were so jubilant as they saw our Lord making his way into the Holy City.⁵

For centuries, the Jews had waited and dreamt and prayed and hoped for the Messiah's coming. For the Jews, the appearance of the Messiah would herald the beginning of a golden and glorious age for Israel. The glory and splendour of David's rule would return to the Promised Land. There would be prosperity for all. There would be no more hunger. God's people would be set free from foreign domination. Jerusalem would be at the centre of the world, and all the kings and

² Meaning 'house of figs'; Bethphage was a small village east of Jerusalem and situated on the Mount of Olives. According to Old Testament prophets, from the Mount of Olives would come Messianic judgement and from it would arise Messianic resurrection (Zech 14. 1 – 9; Ezek 43. 2 – 9).

³ It can be presumed that the foal had never been ridden. This is significant in light of the ancient provision that an animal devoted to a sacred purpose must be pure and unblemished, one that has never been put to ordinary use (cf. Num 19. 2; Deut 21. 3).

⁴ The Jews looked forward to a Messiah King who would be of Davidic descent (cf. 2 Sam 7. 12 – 16; Jer 23. 5).

⁵ The kingly entrance into Jerusalem has a precedent in Solomon. Following his anointing by Nathan, David's son was seated on a royal mule so that he could ride into the Holy City and to take up his throne (cf. I Ki 1. 33 – 44).

rulers of the earth would come there to worship the God of Israel. The coming of the Messiah would herald the beginning of a glorious, wondrous and beautiful time for the people of the Lord. No wonder the crowds were so excited.

In actual fact, the excitement had been building for some time already. A large crowd of people followed Jesus and his disciples into Jerusalem. Why were they following him? 'Because they too were on their way from Galilee to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover', you might say. Yet St Luke tells us that whilst he was on his way to Jerusalem, Christ healed ten lepers and restored the sight of a blind beggar. Many, many people accompanied our Lord as he travelled from Bethphage into the City of David.

When Jesus mounted on the foal of the donkey the crowd's excitement could be contained no longer. The Messiah, the King and the Son of David had to be greeted for the royal personage that he was. Some people spread their cloaks on the road,⁶ whilst others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road as Christ passed by.

It is in St John's Gospel (12. 13) that we learn that these branches were actually palm branches; and there again for the Jews, palm branches were a very definite sign. At the time of our Lord, the palm branch was the national symbol for Israel. Nearly two hundred years earlier, when Simon Maccabeus had captured the castle of Jerusalem (142 BC), the Jews took possession of it carrying palm branches. And one hundred years after the death of Jesus, when Palestine revolted against Rome (AD 132 – 135), the palm was the symbol for resistance that was imprinted on the Jewish currency. By welcoming Christ into Jerusalem with palm branches, people welcomed him not only as Messiah, but also as the King of Israel who would lead them to victory.

⁶ The spreading of cloaks on the road is reminiscent of the story of Jehu. Following his anointing as king by the prophet Elisha, he was welcomed by his subjects who threw their garments under his steps (cf. 2 Ki 9. 13).

What a scene St Luke has described for us! A man of ordinary appearance, riding on the foal of a donkey; and a crowd behind, yelling: ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!’ Our Lord makes a triumphal, but anti-imperial entry into Jerusalem; in meekness and servanthood, yet with all of his God-given authority.

At the beginning of this talk, you’ll remember that we looked at two separate roads leading into Jerusalem. The road from the west was taken by Pilate, a road of pomp and power; and the road from the southeast was taken by Jesus, a road of divine authority, cloaked in obedience, servanthood and love. To put it simply, Pilate took his own way, and Jesus chose to take God’s way.

If we are willing to recognise Jesus for who he really is (that is, Messiah and King, Saviour and Lord, the one sent from God to establish the kingdom of God), then we must decide which road we choose to take; and whether we will allow him to rule in our hearts.

Perhaps in speaking of someone, you have heard people say, ‘He marches to the beat of his own drum’. Or perhaps you have heard, ‘So-and-so is a law unto herself.’ These phrases were never meant to describe the Christian. If Jesus is indeed King, he is also *our* King. If the authority of Christ extends to all things, it also extends to *our* lives.

Today on Palm Sunday, as we decide which road we are on, it is fitting that we remember a prophetic vision that concerns us and which is recorded in the book of Revelation:

‘After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne

and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (7. 9-10).

Dear friends, let us step into that vision that the Lord has of us.

‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!’

+ Amen.