



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The way of generous love

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Matthew 21:1–11

“As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ “Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

¹¹ The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

When Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, it would have been almost impossible for the people to really understand what lay ahead in a matter of only a few days. First of all as we revisit that first Palm Sunday, let us put it into its context.

The last recorded incident on the road from the Galilee to Jerusalem was in Jericho—and we have recorded for us in Matthew’s gospel the account of two blind men whose sight was restored by Jesus. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was only about 24 kilometres but it was—and still is—through barren, dry desert and would involve a continuous climb for much of the way.

This helps us to appreciate the fact that they would need rest as they approached the Mount of Olives. They stayed at Bethany and this would become the base for Jesus and the disciples during the last free days before his arrest.

Near Bethany is Bethphage which Matthew tells us is the place from which Jesus directed his entry into the city of Jerusalem. In reading the various accounts, we notice the specific arrangements that are made to prepare for this final week of his life. The events themselves unfold before the eyes of the disciples and yet it is the very atmosphere of the moment that injects even greater meaning into all that is happening. We recognise a number of factors:

- Passover season would heighten Messianic expectation amongst the people
- the descent from the Mount of Olives would evoke images of liberation ... coming into the city!

- for those ready to hear, Jesus seems intentionally to declare his identity.

This evening in the Wesley Theatre, the calendar brings us to that time of the year when we consider our response to the support of our congregational life, week by week. It is not too difficult to make the link between what we know as Palm Sunday and our own response to support God's work.

All the best understanding of giving is in relationship to the way in which we have received from God. Frederick Beuchner concluded, 'The world says, The more you take, the more you have. Christ says, The more you give, the more you are.'

We see the gift of God in Jesus Christ entering the city as one continuous act of generosity. It is expressed in commitment and purpose and reaches a focus for all time in his love demonstrated on the cross.

When I first came to Australia, I made it a priority to learn all I could about our unique aspects and so it was important to understand the intricacies of AFL. Prior to coming here, I had read that Aussie Rules was dominated by Melbourne and Victoria ... and so you can imagine how interesting it was to arrive and find the Sydney Swans winning the Grand Final. The city, understandably, wanted to celebrate and a tickertape parade took place through the streets of the city, practically on our Wesley Mission doorstep.

Because of the Passover, the population of Jerusalem more than doubled overnight. People converged upon the Holy City over great distances. The Jewish historian, Josephus, records that as many as a million pilgrims came annually to the feast. It was a time when families were reunited, friendships were reignited and there was a palpable sense of heightened expectation.

When Jesus entered the city, it must have had a feel of something akin to a tickertape welcome. We are told in Matthew's gospel that he was already accompanied by a great crowd (20:29).

Just who was in the crowd is hard to establish. Many would undoubtedly be on their own pilgrimage, but folks would find themselves drawn into what was happening.

Let me tell you about Clint Dennis. His life had come to a crossroad, after much wandering, and he realised something was missing. He decided to go to a church for the first time for many years. When he entered the church, he noticed people putting on long robes. Many were tying ropes around their waists and wrapping special headgear on.

A stranger spoke to him and said, 'Come, be part of the mob.' It was Palm Sunday and the church was re-enacting the Way of the Cross. He was told he would be part of the crowd and all he had to do was shout, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' Hesitantly, he agreed.

It all got a bit too serious when another stranger hurried up to him and said, 'Bill, who is meant to play one of the thieves on the cross, hasn't shown up. Would you take his place?'

The reason this was very serious for Clint was because he had been in prison for ten years and was a real thief. Even after his release, he had gone on stealing cars and trucks, until he realised that something was missing from his life.

Somehow he had got caught up with the crowd but, in the midst of the clamour, it was as if God was asking a question of him.

- earlier today, we shared our witness together

- God speaks through crowds to individuals.

When Jesus came into Jerusalem, the mood did not seem particularly victorious. Tears for the city are much more telling of the moment and, before the end of the week, there would be those who would shout, 'Crucify him!' He deliberately presents himself in a way that was so different from what might have been expected.

Jesus always stirs and intrigues people and our text confirms the fact: 'When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" 'The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.'" (Matthew 21:10–11)

The events for which Jesus has been preparing the disciples seem to unfold very quickly. We are more than familiar with the fact that people threw garments on the ground and others cut palm fronds from the trees to spread on the road before him. The palms had their identity with earlier incidents of liberation ... and even some coins of the day, used by the Jews, contained pictures of palms.

In this large crowd, there would be a mixture of different types of people. In Luke's gospel, we read, 'When he came to the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples ...' (Luke 19:37) which would tend to suggest that we are not just talking about 'The Twelve', but a much larger group, who come into play again towards the end of the gospel and in the early days of the Christian community.

Let us explore three areas of this entry into the city and, in each, seek to discover whether it has anything to say to us about our own allegiance to Jesus Christ and our willingness to be engaged in his work today.

It was a way of choice

There are many ways in which people understand Palm Sunday and, not surprisingly, much is made of the fulfilment of prophecy. I don't take anything away from that ... and the humility of Jesus riding on a donkey would not be lost on some who observed what was happening.

The late Henri Nouwen, a Dutch-born priest, was a remarkable and insightful writer, who tells of how he found a sculpture of Jesus on a donkey in the Augustiner Museum in Freiberg. He describes it as one of the most moving Christ figures he ever encountered. The fourteenth century sculpture originally came from a small town on the Rhine. It was made to be pulled on a cart for the Palm Sunday procession.

Nouwen found himself drawn to this sculpture, so much so that he sent postcards of it to his friends and kept one in his own prayer book. Looking at the face of Jesus, he reflects, 'There is melancholy, but also peaceful acceptance. There is insight into the fickleness of the human heart, but also immense compassion. There is a deep awareness of the unspeakable pain to be suffered, but also a strong determination to do God's will. Above all, there is love, an endless, deep and far-reaching love borne from an unbreakable intimacy with God and reaching out to all people, wherever they are, were, or will be. There is nothing that he does not fully know. There is nobody whom he does not fully love.'

Yes, we may concentrate on the fulfilment of prophecy, but there is also a holy determination about Jesus that led the hymn writer to pen, 'Ride on, ride on in majesty!'

When we call people to follow Jesus Christ, we know it is a meeting of a person with the grace of God that reaches out to all. The whole Christian life rings in tune with this pattern:

- our growth in discipleship requires our decision to keep following
- our growth in generosity is letting go of what we consider ours ... and offering it to God.

The wonderful missionary to India, Amy Carmichael, wrote, 'You can give without loving, but you can't love without giving.'

It was a way of recognition

When I read the words of our text, which refers to the city being stirred, I am drawn to the New Revised Standard Version, which tells us 'When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil ...'

Consider the word 'turmoil' ... it has a real sense of disturbance about it. There is the thought of something bubbling up and about to boil over. The actual Greek word is seio which means 'to rock to and fro' or 'to agitate' ... or even 'to quake' or 'to shake'.

This understanding seems to be quite contrary to the party atmosphere that far too many associate with Jesus' entry into the city. Just reflect for a moment:

- the heated cauldron that Passover created
- Governor Pilate was too concerned with far-away Rome, rather than what was happening with the local Jewish populace
- the puppet King Herod was viewed as a clown.

Into these seething streets comes Jesus of Nazareth, mounted on a donkey, the beast that the prophet Zechariah had said would bear the Messiah. The traditional cry of the Jewish people was 'Hosanna' ... which means 'save us'.

Because I describe the entry of Jesus Christ as a way of recognition does not mean that I think we should believe everyone recognised just who he was.

Throughout the coming week here at Wesley Mission, as well as across the whole world, people will find themselves focusing upon the way of the cross. This journey was not filled with those who loved him. The dark words ... betrayal, denial, hate, suffering and rejection ... paved the painfully familiar road to Calvary!

Once a person recognises Jesus for who he is, then there develops a longing to offer to him all that constitutes our lives. It was Rousseau who said, 'When people die, they clutch in their hands only that which they gave away during their lifetime.'

It is a way that calls for our identification with him

Jesus no sooner got on the donkey than the crowds erupted in a need to follow him. The picture we have seems to be of people running ahead and a sense of anticipation that perhaps the time has now arrived when the conquering king would enter the capital city.

On this Sunday, throughout the Christian world, all authentic celebration reminds us that the entry into the city cannot be separated from the way of the cross.

On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus knew that before the week was over he would walk through the streets of Jerusalem, carrying a cross. There would be no cheering crowds that day and he knew what he was about to do was to fulfil God's ultimate purpose.

Are you ... and am I ... willing to identify with him?

Jesus had set his face like flint, resolved to go to Jerusalem, to assume the mantle of Messiahship, and the stone which the builders had rejected would become the head of the corner. The supreme single-mindedness of purpose of Jesus would make best sense when we hold all the events of the coming week together as one, including cross and resurrection.

- a week that changed the world
- a week that has every emotion of life within it
- a week that leads to a cross and an empty tomb.

Having left Galilee, by the time Jesus reached Jericho, he was accompanied by a great crowd. When he came to Bethany, he was joined by another crowd—and, when he arrived in Jerusalem, still another crowd went out to meet him. But where were the crowds at the end of that day?

Elizabeth Cecilia Clephane wrote the words of 'Beneath the Cross of Jesus'. The hymn was part of a much longer poem, but it leads us to the commitment of standing with Jesus Christ at his cross. Ira Sankey set the words to the familiar tune of the same name. The third verse calls for a response in openness to God's love:

And from my smitten heart, with tears,
Two wonders I confess
The wonders of His glorious love,
And my own worthlessness.

As we come to this Sunday, we recognise it is better called Passion Sunday, as we see the beginnings of a week of suffering. In Matthew's gospel, the triumphal entry is followed by Jesus cleansing the temple and the section concludes with these words:

'And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.' (21:17)

There is no mention of the donkey ... he had been returned to his owner. Perhaps the palm branches lay withering on the streets and all the crowd have dispersed to their lodgings—and so does Jesus ... a solitary Saviour ready to give his life for all of us.