

## Sermon Archive 531

Sunday 13 April, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection for Palm Sunday

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



**The Palm Sunday Narrative:** Matthew 21: 1-9

**The First Lesson:** Luke 7: 18-23

**Reflection:** Who are we expecting to see?

Some time before Jesus entered Jerusalem, maybe a couple of years (no one knows for sure), John the Baptist had some doubts about whether Jesus really was the One. John had told everyone that he was - in his famous "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world". But now he's not so sure. In the dark of a prison cell, perhaps realising that his time is coming, and he might not be around to see what Jesus will do, he sends some of his people to ask Jesus, simply, whether he *is* the One. We are not the first to ask "who are you, Lord?"

Jesus receives those who bring the question of John. He listens. He tells them to go back to John, with news of what they have seen. Many people cured of disease. Many set free from evil. Many who were blind having their sight restored. The deaf hearing. The lame walking. The poor at long last receiving good news. Who am I? Describe for John what you see.

Jesus is thinking then of John - in his prison, and how in times now gone he preached and baptised, and drew the attention of so many of those from the city and towns. Out they'd gone to see him, to hear him, to get a sense of who he was, what he was doing, what it all meant. And Jesus puts his own question to them: when you went out there, what were you expecting to see? Surely you didn't go out to watch reeds blowing in the wind and the waters of the Jordan. Surely you didn't go out there to see anyone dressed in high fashion clothes. No, you find those in your leafy suburbs and the apartments in town. You were looking for something else. Whenever a crowd forms, as it formed for John, we're looking for something else - which perhaps we can't just yet put our finger on. We know what we're not seeking - do we? The

search is messy. Who is he? Our seeking to know is a kind of "going out" - chasing a vision that moves as we go. Who is he?

-ooOoo-

And today, another crowd gathered. Had they seen him approaching the outskirts of the city? Had they been told that Passover was bound to be the time he'd come? Rumour had it that some information was bubbling - someone had been told to prepare the transport (that detail probably leaked). Out they go - but who were they expecting to see?

They lived in an occupied land. What **was** it about this people? That kept them having to cope with oppression? From the early days of slavery in Egypt. Through the experiences of being exiled - not once, but twice. And now occupied by Romans. I mean, what is it? Like there's some big target on their back, some sandwich board signs around their shoulders saying "occupy me, I'm Hebrew!"

It's not like when history repeats itself, and we're oppressed again, we kind of say "O well, this is status quo; we're kind of getting used to it". No, it's a cumulative growth of wisdom linked to a withering of spirit . . . Someone was fond of quoting the Greek philosopher poet Aeschylus: *"He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God."* Drop by drop, falling on the heart . . .

People subjected to experience after experience of being enslaved . . . drop by drop. Wiser, maybe. Broken, almost certainly . . .

Who do they think he is?

Well, they **call** him "someone who's coming in the name of the Lord". They call him someone who's bringing back the kingdom of David. It's "glory days" they see - when everyone was proud. When greatness was obvious. When their nation **won**. And "hosanna" was what they cried. Not a pious "alleuia" (praise the Lord) - but a full-voiced "hosanna", which in their language means "Lord, save us".

Who did they think he was? It seems they thought he was a magnificent king who would save them.

Throughout Lent, we've been exploring the theme of slavery. We've visited the slaves in Egypt, turned into an under-class by a heart-hardened leader

who wouldn't let them go. We've found people trapped into racial hatred and falsehood by the Father of all lies. We've spent time with Andaman who can't find his passport. We've heard of Filipino construction workers living in shipping containers because the jobs they expected turned out not to exist. We've watched a sheepish slave sent back to his master with a letter in his hand, asking for clemency. We've heard of the manifesto read out loud to people in a synagogue in Nazareth - and how the manifesto spread - release for the captives, freedom for the slaves.

And today, in this occupied land, out the human beings go to welcome their king. Who do they say he is?

-ooOoo-

He has chosen on this day, for this reception, to speak to "who he is" by riding a little donkey. And the evangelist who's telling this story says the donkey riding took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet: "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass". Jesus, the Hosanna King is coming in humility.

In this kingdom, facing a world of slavery and oppression, he comes in humility. We are thinking that the way to end slavery, to overthrow oppression, must involve an old-fashioned strong-armed king. Jesus says, without words, that he is not that kind of king, that freedom shall not come through force - but through something else that is closer to humility than absolute power. Who is he? Who are they expecting to see?

**The Second Lesson:** Matthew 16: 13-20

**A Short Reflection:** I love you, but I don't understand you

Some time before this, again, in a quiet moment with those who probably knew him best, he had asked the question "who do they say that I am?" It's like this identity question keeps returning . . .

There were various answers given, and maybe it was fun - until he turned the question almost entirely around: who do **you** say I am?

I imagine the conversation stalling, as people think, "my God, what are we meant to say now!" From the pause comes Peter's confession. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". Jesus assures him that his answer is inspired. It has captured a profound truth about who Jesus is, and what

he is creating. Not even the gates of Hell will prevail against this insight. In this insight is more power than the world will ever know.

Interestingly, as soon as he has said this, he warns his disciples not to tell anyone else. Funny man! I wonder why he'd do that. Maybe it hadn't quite been time yet back then. I wonder, though, **now** as crowds go out to greet their donkey-riding king, is it still not time?

-ooOoo-

Lord Jesus Christ. I love you, but I don't understand you. Is that the problem? Is there one last piece of the picture I need to find, before I can answer who you are, and what it all means in a world of slavery that just needs freedom?

Throughout the whole of my Lenten season, Lord, you have come into focus, then I lose you again. I keep finishing my sermons with the "save me" suggestion that maybe the missing piece lies somewhere off in something like Easter - like I might be glimpsing a vision . . . a vision from Easter. Slavery's taking my friends, and tormenting my desire to have things "right". Some of the impatience of the years has become a stone in my shoe - a thorn in my flesh, a spear driven into my side, a nail through my wrist . . .

Ha! Is there a vision from Easter? For today, I see you on your donkey. Quietly, not like it properly fits, I say "hosanna; Lord save us". Offering you our slavery, our longing for freedom, we say "welcome to the city". We are waiting to see who you are.

Amen.