

Palm Sunday

Luke 19:28-44

The prophets of Israel had a regular custom of which they made use time and time again. When words were of no effect, when people's hearts were hardened, when people couldn't quite grasp the content of the prophetic message, the prophets would resort to dramatic actions that would put their message into a picture which none could fail to see.

For Ezekiel, that meant lying on his side for 390 days to symbolise the siege of Jerusalem.

For Hosea, that meant marrying a prostitute so the people would see what they were doing to their God, as they worshipped idols and foreign gods.

For Jeremiah, that meant making a yoke to go around his neck to symbolise the people's captivity under Babylon.

For Jesus, the message he needed to get across was that he was the Messiah, the King of the Jews, God's anointed ruler. Jesus' message though was not one of a violent rebellion against the Roman occupation; nor is it a message of extreme asceticism or more religious laws; it was a message of peace and grace. And so, he comes to Jerusalem not with war horses, but on a colt. He comes to Jerusalem and fulfils Zechariah's prophecy that Jerusalem's king will come, riding on a donkey. He comes to Jerusalem and the people cheer, waving palm branches and laying out their cloaks before him.

'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord'

'Peace in heaven and glory in the highest'

He comes to Jerusalem... despite the fact there is a price on his head, despite the fact that the religious leaders are looking for any excuse for a trial, despite the fact that those who now cheer him will soon be shouting 'Crucify him! Crucify him!'

Palm Sunday embodies Jesus' glorious defiance and superlative courage. Jesus knew what the coming week would hold – he's not stupid or ignorant. He'd already told his disciples that he must suffer and give his life as a ransom for many, even if they just don't quite get it yet.

Surely, Jesus could have avoided such pain. Jesus could have stayed a wandering rabbi in Galilee and lived happily for many more years telling his parables and performing miracles. Jesus could have slipped anonymously through the back streets of Jerusalem for Passover, and gone back home after without passing through death's dark vale. Jesus could have refused to challenge the religious elite, and taken the easy option – the option that the world wanted. Jesus could have left Israel as she was, but he had the audacity to change history. He had the audacity to head towards a cross and a brutal execution.

It is impossible to exaggerate the sheer courage of Jesus as he walked straight into the midst of his enemies.

'Not my will, Father, but yours be done'

Jesus prayed that prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday, but I believe that it must have been in his heart before then.

'Not my will, Father, but yours be done'

How Jesus must have cried that prayer before the people cheered him. How Jesus must have thought that prayer when he listened to the Pharisees telling him to rebuke his disciples' praise. How Jesus must have whispered that prayer as he saw the site of his crucifixion in the distance.

'Not my will, Father, but yours be done...'

Intertwined with Jesus' courage, we see Jesus' sovereignty and mercy intermingling as he rides into Jerusalem. Although the human Jesus *chooses* to follow God's plan, there is still a pending inevitability in the atmosphere. The gospels all look forward to this one week in Jesus' life, and yet again, we see God's sovereignty reasserted – as the owner of the colt

responds to the simple request 'The Lord needs it'; as Jesus responds to the Pharisees by declaring that if his followers do not worship him, the stones will be forced to cry out; as Jesus walks on towards Calvary...

God's plan for reconciling all people to himself through the cross is unstoppable.

God's plan for bringing glorious hope to all is inescapable.

History is driving relentlessly towards its climax.

It's clearly a painful reality for Jesus, and we see Jesus' emotive mercy: 'As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it'.

Jesus weeps for Jerusalem is still staggeringly ignorant of who he truly is.

Jesus weeps for his fickle followers who will soon scatter.

Jesus weeps that it has come to this: that the hands that painted the sky will be nailed to a wooden cross by mortals.

The tears of our Creator run down his cheeks...

Jesus cried 'Not my will, Father, but yours be done', and so should we.

Jesus is praised, and we too are compelled to praise.

Jesus weeps, and we should also weep – that the world does not see, that it has come to this, that there is no other way.

As God's love and Jesus' self-sacrifice burst into reality, may they burst into our reality.

May Jesus' courage, sovereignty and mercy touch you and me this Palm Sunday and this Holy Week. May we be witnesses to a love and humility that no knows no bounds. This is the week that changed the world: may it change our lives for his glory forevermore.

Amen.

Matthew Stone 28/3/10