

MATTHEW 21:1-17 CBC 28.3.2021 (Palm Sunday)

Please read Matthew 21:1-17 ...

We call this week, “**Holy Week**” – and it’s good to decide now that this is indeed going to be a holy week for us, when we follow our Lord in His journey to conflict in Jerusalem; to the sufferings and triumph of the cross; and to the death-defeating glory of His resurrection on Easter morning.

If we would discipline ourselves to walk with Jesus through this story, and to work it into our hearts and minds through prayer and meditation, this would truly be a holy week.

The week begins today with Palm Sunday. We meet our Lord as He approaches Jerusalem and enters the city. We should go out to meet Him in order to follow Him. Is that your commitment to Him? He is committed to you. He came to Jerusalem to die for you. Don’t ever say “*Nobody loves me. Nobody cares about me.*” God does, and Palm Sunday helps us to understand what that means.

A thousand pages of Scripture have already told the story up to this point, beginning with God’s creation of a good world, and our satanically inspired rebellion that has left us broken, lost and dying.

But not forsaken! God promised from the outset that He would redeem a people for Himself. He raised up prophets to speak His word ... priests to offer sacrifices and prayers ... kings to shepherd His people ... all of them specially anointed by God to keep His people’s eyes on Him. They were signposts to redemption, pointing forward to THE Anointed One, the Messiah, the ultimate Prophet, Priest and King who would rescue God’s people.

And the reason there was such excitement when Jesus entered Jerusalem was because so many people were already convinced that He was the promised Messiah. One of them was Matthew! He’s been telling us from the beginning of his gospel that God’s Messiah is Jesus. In ch.21 he shows us Jesus entering Jerusalem as the promised Prophet, Priest and King.

1. JESUS IS THE KING

That’s vv.1-11. Matthew tells us in vv.1-3 that Jesus made elaborate arrangements to enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey’s colt. And if we ask why, the answer is given in vv.4-5: “*This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet (Zechariah): ‘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.”*”

Notice that Zechariah’s prophecy has two elements to it: the Messiah would be a KING and would be GENTLE. What God has joined, let no one separate!

But the crowd did. They put the emphasis on the first part: they were excited to think that Jesus was the promised King. They knew of His miracles and His mighty power. They cheered Him as “*the Son of David*” (v.9) – the one who would rebuild David’s empire and do what David did: defend the nation against foreign armies like the Romans who were occupying their land.

Were they right about Jesus’ kingly power? Of course! By the end of Matthew we read that Jesus is the Son of David who is also David’s Lord; the One to whom God gives all authority in heaven and

earth; of whose reign there will be no end. He's not just A king but THE King, who is the King of all kings and the Lord of all lords.

But as I'm sure you know, the crowd were giving Jesus the right title yet with the wrong meaning. They were happy with a little Bible knowledge to which they attached all their own wishes. And so they missed the bigger message of the Scriptures and came to an incorrect understanding of what the Messiah came to do.

Jesus' understanding was much deeper. He brought together all the elements of Old Testament prophecy and understood that the Messiah / King would be a lowly Servant who would suffer. That wasn't popular teaching. All through Jesus' ministry people were excited by the miracles, but when Jesus taught hard things about suffering and sacrifice, the crowds melted away. They quickly turned against Him in Jerusalem too when He didn't give them what they wanted.

Learn this lesson: Jesus won't change His agenda for us. And that's not because He hates us – it's because He loves us, and knows what we really need. He enters Jerusalem in a triumphal procession indicating His Kingship, but He's a King with a difference, a gentle King, the Servant King. He rides a donkey, not a warhorse, and it fits with what He has said about Himself all along:

- Mt 11:29 *"I am gentle and humble in heart, and (if you come to me) you will find rest for your souls."*
- Mt 12:20 *"A bruised reed He will not break, and a smouldering wick He will not snuff out."*

So when King Jesus comes to Jerusalem, He comes in the deepest humility because He doesn't come to ascend a throne of this world's glory, but to ascend a cross of this world's shame. He's the King who is different from all other kings. And this of course is the message of Palm Sunday: that the Lord Jesus comes to do something none of us would expect.

That's why we shouldn't despise the crowd for getting it wrong. Of course, we could blame them for their wrong expectations. If only they'd listened more carefully when Jesus talked about going to Jerusalem to die. Why did the way of the cross surprise them?

But think of your own experience. I've heard so many Christians say when suffering comes, *"I can't understand why God has allowed this!"* – as though it's a complete surprise to them that Christians may suffer all kinds of trials. We've all met people who've said something like, *"I used to believe, but when my mum died ..."*. What was the gospel they responded to?

There are moments for all of us when we'd rather have a Messiah of our own making than the One who is. We'd prefer a Messiah who would deliver our kingdom rather than God's Kingdom. But that's impossible. God loves us too much for that. He won't be reduced to the genie of the lamp: *"Your wish is my command"* – miracles on tap.

No, we must honour Christ as our King. But as He rides into Jerusalem He wants it to be known that He is a King marked by gentleness and humility, because He is coming to die, to save His people from their sins. And that is to say, He is precisely the King we need.

But don't mistake His gentleness for weakness! When Jesus enters Jerusalem He comes to the Temple as a Priest with authority to purge evil and to cleanse:

2. JESUS IS OUR PRIEST

v.12 is dramatic and decisive: *“Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves. ‘It is written,’ he said to them, “My house will be called a house of prayer,” but you are making it “a den of robbers.”*” Gentle Jesus still has authority! Indeed, He has ALL authority (28:18). And here He uses His authority as Priest over the house of God to put a stop to abuses in the Temple. He drives out those who had turned the worship of God into a business, so that prayer had been squeezed out.

Beware of saying *“Thank God this could never happen in our church”* – perhaps it has already happened. What’s the thing that in so many churches is most glaringly absent? The same thing that was missing in the Temple: prayer. It happens so easily ... unintentionally ... without us even noticing. But when we stop and look, we may find our church programme is packed, yet without even one hour a week being given to prayer.

One of the challenges we’ll face post-Covid is reviewing our activities rather than automatically restarting everything. Which are really worth restarting? Which should we let go, and give ourselves instead to prayer?

Jesus the Priest cleansed the Temple when what was secondary had been made central, and what was central had become secondary. What is it that Christ finds when He looks at Corsham Baptist Church? Could it be that our church needs to be cleansed?

Actually, there was some wonderful fruit when Jesus cleansed the Temple. The animals were driven out, and that was no real loss because they weren’t going to be needed any more. As Priest, He was going to sacrifice Himself for our sins, an offering so wonderful that no animal sacrifices would ever be necessary again.

But if Jesus emptied the Temple of animals, He filled the Temple with people seeking God’s mercy and singing God’s praises! The religious leaders may have wished Jesus would fall into a hole, but the weak and the broken came flocking to Him: v.14 *“The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.”*

It must have been an incredible sight! For a moment, the Temple was turned into something that resembled an A&E department – but no-one was left waiting on a trolley for long because Jesus healed them. So cries of *“Help me!”* were replaced by shouts of *“Hallelujah, I’ve been healed! I can see!”* And children were singing praises to Jesus: *“Hosanna to the Son of David!”* (v.15).

But the very next phrase is tragedy: *“They (the religious leaders) were indignant”* (v.15). They said, *“We don’t want that kind of thing in our church!”* And they screamed at Jesus to stop it. What a tragic moment! It was a moment when the religious hierarchy who’d been so blind *could* have repented if they wanted to. They could have joined the others in saying, *“Lord Jesus, please open our eyes!”* But they refused to see.

And as they yell for Jesus to stop the children’s praises, we see Jesus in His third great office:

3. JESUS IS OUR PROPHET

He's been named for us in v.11 as "*Jesus the prophet*", and He's the supreme prophet of all time. He doesn't just speak the word of God, He IS the word of God, it's incarnation. Everything about Him is a revelation of God. And as prophet He does what the Old Testament prophets regularly did: He unmasks religious hypocrisy.

Look at the stinging rebuke in v.16: "*Have you never read, 'From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise'?*" – Of course they had! They'd imbibed that Psalm (Ps 8) with their mother's milk. They could easily recite its words. But it hadn't impacted their lives.

That should humble all of us who consider ourselves Bible readers. Not that we should stop reading, but that we should pray for the scales to fall from our eyes, and for our hard hearts to be made willing do what God reveals.

CONCLUSION

That's what Matthew wants us to see. He wants us to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ as He rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday:

- Jesus is the King who comes in humility to suffer and die for us;
- He's the Priest who brings the joy of God's salvation to the needy and to little children;
- He's the Prophet who unmasks the awful layers of hypocrisy that linger in our lives so that we'll flee to Him as our Saviour. And He won't turn us away. He'll rejoice over us with singing.

And all that's to say: Jesus is precisely the Prophet, Priest and King that we poor sinners need! Doesn't that make you want to stand up and shout, "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*"?

PRAYER: *From a hymn by John Newton:*

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear;
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.

Jesus, my Shepherd, Saviour, Friend,
My Prophet, Priest, and King;
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
Accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart,
And cold my warmest thought;
But when I see You as You are,
I'll praise You as I ought. AMEN.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION:

- What kind of Jesus do you long for?
- Why is the real Jesus so much better than any we would invent?