

The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

Sermon

Sunday 24 March 2024: Angela Hannafin

Good morning and welcome to Palm Sunday. Today we're going to hear from the gospel of Mark.

¹ As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. ² "Go into that village over there," he told them. "As soon as you enter it, you will see a young donkey tied there that no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks, 'What are you doing?' just say, 'The Lord needs it and will return it soon.'"

⁴ The two disciples left and found the colt standing in the street, tied outside the front door. ⁵ As they were untying it, some bystanders demanded, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶ They said what Jesus had told them to say, and they were permitted to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it, and he sat on it.

⁸ Many in the crowd spread their garments on the road ahead of him, and others spread leafy branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Jesus was in the centre of the procession, and the people all around him were shouting, "Praise God!

Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessings on the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David!

Praise God in highest heaven!"

¹¹ So Jesus came to Jerusalem and went into the Temple. After looking around carefully at everything, he left because it was late in the afternoon. Then he returned to Bethany with the twelve disciples".

We know parts of this story so well. Perhaps we first heard it as a child, waving our palm branches and singing 'Hosanna' as we mimic the crowds who greeted Jesus when he came into Jerusalem. Growing up in the 1970s I remember my Hamlyn Children's Bible with its golden colours on the book jacket and stylised view of Jesus on a donkey inside.

But maybe there are parts of the story we don't remember so well – like the specific instructions Jesus gave to his disciples, the curious bystanders who respond positively once Jesus's words are repeated. Mark's version of this story also notes Jesus going into the Temple to look carefully at everything. Through the lens of Mark it seems that there has been some planning, and things are not just happening by accident. This triumphant entry had been prophesied through the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, some five hundred years before Christ was even born.

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Today is not just about the waving of the palms and the delight of the crowd who meet him. This is Jesus' journey to the cross. Later on in the week, the tone will change and we will follow Jesus through the chaos and madness of his arrest. We know this journey will take him into dark and difficult places, as he sweats blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he prays through the night, as he carries his own cross and as he eventually dies an agonising death. Sometimes when we read the narrative it can seem so messy. Our own desire for control can make us just want to skip to Easter Sunday and skip some of the painful places of this week. Yet if we want to walk with Christ, we must slow down this week. As the apostle Paul said, "I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!" If we really want to know Christ, we need to stay by his side and let him take us into difficult places.

Behind the drama of Holy Week is God's hand, orchestrating every little detail, foretold many years ago in the scriptures. It is God's hand that will roll the stone away from the tomb. It is God who will raise Christ victorious in a week's time. It is God who is working in our lives even when things are messy and chaotic. It is God who can bring life even out of death. But sometimes we don't take time to slow down and see the detail.

Lent has been a time of wrestling with our own personal wildernesses, of recognising our own failures and acknowledging that we are corrupting the work of God in the world. And if you think that sounds too strong, then let's remember what John said – if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. In a world of personal rights, of increased individualism of where everything we do together seems less important than what we do in person, we join with Christians all around the world to admit we need God in our wildernesses and in our failures.

Today, the holiness of God has now entered the holy city and the sacred spaces. What will that mean for you this week? Will you keep reading the passage as you do every year? Or will you slow down and see things through a fresh lens? Will you follow Jesus as he walks to the cross? Will you watch and pray with him through the dark spaces?

In a world which is said to be VUCA – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous, there is someone we can turn to. As we walk with Jesus in the final week of his life we remember his journey, his passion and the events that reveal God's plan for reconciliation for humankind, culminating in the extraordinary discovery of the empty tomb on Sunday morning. If you think you know the story, then I invite you to look again, to draw near to God for the scriptures say he will draw near to you. And as you journey with Jesus, may he reveal more of his deep, deep love to you. AMEN.