

Sermon Palm Sunday Year C 2022

It is one of the remarkable aspects of our Christian faith that two seemingly opposite ideas or sentiments, even experiences or emotions, can be held alongside each other in remarkable, harmonious tension. Our celebration today is one such example. This annual celebration of Palm Sunday, of our Lord's entry into Jerusalem, holds together intense opposites and invites us to see how they speak to and inform each other. Our worship today contains *two unique elements*. At first, they do not appear to naturally or easily sit together. They seem to push against each other, to be in conflict with each other. But the wisdom of Mother Church is to place them together, for them to sit side by side.

The first, our ceremony out-of-doors. We bless palms. We sing songs of praise. There is a joyful procession around the church. And in all this, the notes are of triumph, of joy, of enthusiasm, of optimism, even. There is excitement and fervor surrounding the narrative we enact in our ritual observance. But these notes of triumph, of joy and excitement, give way to the second distinct feature of today's worship: the solemn proclamation of the Passion of Our Lord, this year by Luke. And in this, betrayal and loss, anguish and sorrow, suffering and death are presented to us front and centre. The vast scale of human misery and pain held alongside those notes of triumph and joy.

How is it that in the Christian vision of things, triumph and joy can sit alongside sorrow and death? Is this not just a case of impossible contradictions? Why is it that the church stitches these two aspects together so uncomfortably? Well, quite simply, because of the One who is at the centre of all this action, Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, *there are no* irreconcilable contradictions! Yes, there are tensions and paradoxes at work. Yes, complexities at work. But the different elements of Christ's life we consider today are not part of an irrational, demented-like disorder. It is the one Christ who enters Jerusalem and ascends Calvary. It is the one Christ who rides the donkey and is raised upon the cross. It is the one Christ who is received with adulation one moment, and cruel derision the next. It is the one Christ who is received by the crowd but dies alone. The gospel writer Luke understands this dynamic unity at work in Christ. It is not as if - as he sets down to record the life of Jesus - he jumps from one unrelated moment to another unrelated moment. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem *is not* a distinct moment to his passion and death. They are *the one work of God*. It is one saving action. It is one movement.

What unites these two seemingly disparate and distinct aspects of Jesus' life in part is what has been playing out the *entire* gospel, namely the proclamation of the kingdom. Jesus' coming, his birth, his life, his teaching, his ministry of exorcism and healing have all proclaimed the reign of God. And now, both Jesus' triumphal entry *and* his death on the cross are the ultimate expressions of what Christ's kingdom and Christ's reign means and what it looks like. Both aspects of what we hear today proclaim the full and true nature of his reign. The essential unity in the movement between Jesus' entrance to the city and his ascent to Calvary confirmed by the very title board: the king of the jews. And all played out in contrast to the pathetic puppet king Herod.

Sometimes it is the details that give the game away! In the account of Jesus' triumphal entry we heard outside today, *five times* the evangelist tells us about the colt being untied. Five times! The disciples will find a colt that is tied up; they are to untie the colt; they might be questioned about the untying; they did untie it; they were asked about untying. Why all the focus on untying?! Because, according to Genesis, when old Jacob blesses his sons, *this is the sign* of the Coming One who is the true ruler of Judah, to whom the nations of the world will submit. He is the one who ties and unties the donkey! The colt hasn't been ridden on before, because that is what is required for the king's mount. And the format of the entry into the city follows the pattern of other examples from Scripture and from the culture of the Ancient Near East. What is most striking is that such events do not mark the crowning of the king, but *the recognition* of the king who has already won his victory. Luke makes it explicit in the acclamation of the crowd: *'Blessed is the coming King!'* So, Jesus comes to the city of the king; he comes in the manner of a king; and he is acclaimed by the crowd of his disciples as the king who hope the kingdom will now be announced. What kind of king Jesus is, and what his kingdom looks like, is further revealed in both the account of Jesus' triumphal entry as well as the account of the Passion.

First, he is a king who brings peace. As Jesus enters the city Luke records the crowds acclaiming: *'Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!'* It is of course the same proclamation of the angels to the shepherds as they made their announcement of the birth of Christ. When Zechariah celebrates the birth of his son, John the Baptist, he anticipates that his ministry will 'give light to those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and guide our feet into the way of peace.

But Jesus reveals the extent of the peace he brings in his death. In the face of his accusers, his mockers and finally executioners he refuses to strike back or retaliate. He becomes a living icon of peace in the face of the very worst humankind can do.

Secondly, Jesus is a king who merits praise and brings joy. *The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully.* If the people stop praising, then Jesus quite sharply tells the Pharisees that the very stones themselves will cry out! But praise does not look or sound just one way. The centurion declares: *surely this man was innocent.* Truth-telling is a form of praise to the God of truth. And even the reverent, careful attentive tending to the broken body of our Lord, a form of worship.

Thirdly, Jesus is a king who brings power. The disciples welcoming Jesus as he enters the city celebrate the '*works of power*' they have seen him doing. Herod thinks it's just about magic tricks. Luke has a distinctive interest in the question of power. When the Spirit comes on Mary, then power from on high rests upon her, the same power that will rest on the disciples when the Spirit comes at Pentecost. And Jesus himself, who goes into the wilderness 'in the Spirit', returns in the 'power of the Spirit.' But this power is not to be used to control, manipulate or restrict, but to bring down the proud 'in the imagination of their hearts' and to give 'freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and to set the oppressed free'. The power of Christ is perhaps seen most poignantly in his exchange with the penitent thief. Upon the throne of the cross, he delivers his final judgment of mercy: *today you will be with me in paradise.*

Jesus' kingship, his reign, is different. The journey 'up' to Jerusalem is not a journey to power and glory, but (as Paul makes very clear in the Philippians reading today), it is a journey 'down' in obedience to death. This is why he brings peace: he has turned us from enemies of God to friends through his death. This is why he brings praise and joy: because his death and resurrection have dealt with the things which separate us from God and from one another. This is the power he offers: power to know forgiveness, truth and life. The account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his suffering mockery, agony and death, then, are rightly held side by side. They belong together. Holy Church in her wisdom forces us to look at both. Not because it is a neat, poetic story-telling device. But because together they reveal the truth about who Christ is, what his reign is, and what the implications of following him are. Amen.