

Sermon for Palm Sunday, April 2, 2023

On Palm Sunday, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem just before the Passover celebration and he rides into the city on a donkey, like the promised Messiah or a king coming in peace, and he allows people to greet him as the Messiah, the Son of David, the true King of Israel. Now, why did he do this? He is right there in the centre of the Jewish world, basically declaring that he is the Messiah they were expecting, presenting an open challenge to both the Jewish and the Roman leadership. Why did he do this?

Because, you know, Jesus wasn't stupid. He knew exactly how they were likely to react. And to make matters worse, he then goes to the Temple and throws out the money changers and the people selling sacrificial animals at exorbitant rates. And then he starts openly teaching, in the temple, telling a lot of parables that show he thinks the Jewish leadership has lost its way and is unfaithful to God. He could hardly have challenged them more clearly and openly. Why does he do this?

Because he could have just faded away for a while and holed up safely in the desert. Or he could have tried to raise an army and take over. Instead he goes defenceless into the heart of power and tells them they're not doing a good job and how they could be more faithful to God. Why? Well, no one knows for sure, but here's what I think.

Jesus was the Messiah and he came to proclaim a new kingdom, the Kingdom of God, which operates on very different principles than the kingdoms of this world, the principle of love. As presiding bishop Michael Curry of the US Episcopal church says, "If it doesn't look like love, it isn't of God."

You can't proclaim a new kingdom based on love if you run away and hole up in the desert. Jesus knew he needed to both proclaim this new Kingdom and also stand up to the oppressive powers of his day, to the rulers, chief priests, Sadducees and Pharisees, and tell them in what ways they were going wrong. In what ways they were being unfaithful to the God they claimed to serve. And you can't start a new kingdom based on love if you start it by using the old methods of killing the old rulers and setting yourself up in their place and keeping yourself there with military might, while lots of innocent bystanders are also killed and displaced. Jesus knew he needed to stand up to them and in a new way, not with military might, but with the power of love and truth.

And Jesus had to show us this, not just tell us, because it's so different. He had to live up to his own teachings. He had to have courage and present his vision in the heart of the worldly powers. And above all, he had to keep loving the people he was talking to, all of them, even to the point of death. He had to keep standing up to them and keep loving them, even when they were killing him. He knew it would be hard. It is hard! He even asked God to please come up with another way. He spent the night before his crucifixion begging God to think of something else. But he also knew there was no other way, and he went through with it and allowed people to arrest him and give him a sham trial and kill him, and he showed them love and forgiveness throughout. And God approved his actions by raising him from the dead.

By doing these things, Jesus showed us that a new kingdom, a new way of living, is possible and God showed us the true power of that new kingdom: it has the power to bring new life, new courage, to shed light in the darkness, and to change people's hearts and souls and lives. Jesus also showed us, if we needed convincing, that God loves us all enough to die for us. That's God's judgement on us all: we're worth dying for. Let that sink in: God thinks we're worth dying for. When it does sink in, it changes everything.

But what does that look like in our day to day life, here and now? What does that change look like when we live it out in our lives?

Well, it means living by love, as Jesus did. It means every relationship we have must be transformed by love. That includes relationships with people we like and with those we can't stand. It means treating every single person we interact with as if they were beloved children of God. Because they are. It means treating people with respect and dignity and being kind to them. Even when they're not kind to us. We can still challenge them. We can still point out the problems and state our needs. We can still stand up for what is right and good. We don't have to let them walk all over us. But we have to do it in a kind way, that doesn't treat them as less than human or be nasty back to them. We have to do it in love. And oh, that's hard to do some days! Well, pretty much all days! OK, let's be honest. It's hard all the time!

In one of the churches I was attending a while ago, there was a woman who was always complaining about something. She found me irritating. I didn't know why, but she did, because she didn't lose any opportunity to annoy me, and undermine my ideas and try to make me sound like an idiot. And I didn't like that and I have to admit that I sometimes felt really hurt and even occasionally lost my temper with her and said some harsh things back and even gossiped to my friends about her.

But one day, after a long time I'm sorry to say, I was feeling kinder and we were alone and she said some sniping thing to me, I don't remember what it was. And instead of flaring up and defending myself, I looked at her and I said, "How are you doing? It seems to me that you might be having a rough time. Is everything OK with you?" And I said it like I really cared.

And you know, her face puckered and she started to cry. She'd been having a very rough time. In fact, she had a very hard life. Her Mom was ill and she was trying to care for her and get her the help she needed. She had a child who was causing her a lot of worry. Her husband was pretty much absent. She didn't have enough money to pay all her bills. And she was at her wit's end. I'd had no idea. She said I always seemed so happy and lucky without a care in the world (I have to say, this wasn't actually the case, but I guess I presented that image). And it was just too hard for her to take. Life seemed unfair. We had a really good talk. I let myself be vulnerable and told her some of my problems, too. And I really listened to her and showed her compassion and love. And do you know what? We became friends after that. Not that we didn't still snipe sometimes, but it got better from that day.

That sort of situation doesn't always have such a happy ending, of course. But treating people with caring and dignity can make a huge difference to them and to us. That's what it means for us to live into Jesus' example. It means to live in love as he lived in love. To be strong and courageous to stand up to those who are hurting others, or us. In some cases that might mean reporting it to the authorities and leaving. In other cases, a word spoken will do it. But however we stand up to unjust people, always to do it with caring and empathy and respect for them. When we can do that, we are truly following Jesus.

Contemplating this last week of Jesus' life on earth, and truly understanding what he was doing, and how much he loved us, all of us, even those who were putting him to death, makes all the difference to us. As we start to more fully understand God's love for us, we can also be filled with that love in our daily lives more and more. And as we do that, we also start to live more deeply in the resurrection life Jesus offers us at Easter. We start to live more fully in the Kingdom of God he proclaimed, and we start to spread that Kingdom of love all around us here in our day to day lives.

I pray that we may all enter more fully than ever before into the Paschal mystery, the mystery of the suffering and death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus this week. I pray that we may all invite him into our whole lives and hearts and souls, deeper than ever before. I pray that we may let ourselves be more fully transformed by him so that we, too, may be filled with his love for all those who share this life with us. May you have a blessed Holy Week.