

“ride on into danger”

Reflection: March 24, 2024 Rev'd Ian Brown

Mark 11:1-11 Psalm 118: 19 - 29

Today's Psalm, 118: 19 – 29

Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.
This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.
I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of
the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.
The Lord is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.
You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.
O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

We imagine Jesus once again, riding his donkey colt through the eastern gate of Jerusalem, surrounded by roaring crowds. Many of them are anxious for a return of David's monarchy, the romanticized time when Israel was something like a significant military power in the region. The "empire" of David was a nation 120 miles north to south and 50 east to west. Small compared to the real empires of the day; Egypt in the west and Assyria/Babylon in the east.

Still, some of the folk in Jerusalem were sick to the teeth of Romans, Romans, and more Romans. They were more than ready for God to do something about them. The story tells us, God did something all right, but in nothing like the ways

hoped for by the crowds at the eastern gate that day. Instead of decimated Romans, what they got was a crucified messiah, and the Romans stayed in their city, armed and in control, right up until they finally gutted the whole place, some forty years later.

The emerging Christian communities looked back much later, on that event and eventually called it Palm Sunday. They reflected on what had happened and naturally gazed longingly at their Bible, which was the Hebrew/Greek Bible for them. They went searching through it for clues to the meaning of it all. Their curious eyes soon fixed on Isaiah 50 and Psalm 118.

“The tongue of a teacher,... I did not turn backward,... I gave my back to those who struck me,
... many of Jesus early followers read these words from Isaiah and were struck by their similarity to Jesus life. It almost read like a script. Each year we remember that Jesus set his face 'like flint' towards Jerusalem.

Then on our psalm, John Holbert, a United Methodist Professor of preaching and Old Testament studies comments, 'In the Psalm there are verses that appear to illumine that Palm Sunday ride. It speaks of entering gates, giving thanks to YHWH. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" was too good to pass up, proclaiming that a rejected one was and is in fact the most important one of all. Psalm 118:25 cries out, "Save us, we implore you, YHWH," very like what the crowds shouted that day. Verse 26 proclaims, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of YHWH," a phrase that could also be translated, "Blessed in the name of YHWH is the one who comes".'

It's much the same still. We humans like to be part of these things. We like to join in, special events draw a crowd and when a few join in, it can become something for everyone. And there will be a range of interpretations as to what it all means!

Mark tells us in his gospel account, that many spread their cloaks on the road and others spread leafy branches cut from the fields. The people

shout, '**Hosanna !, blessed is the one that comes in the name of the Lord.'**

It must have been a tremendous atmosphere, filled with expectation - here was **the one, the one coming in the name of the Lord!**

The crowd evidently expected a new kingdom; "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David", they cry. We have always put much hope in leader figures, we do it still today. But then, in Mark's exact words, "he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

There was a lot going on here. The city was busy with festival atmosphere. A bit like having the footy start, the flower show, the Grand Prix and a Palm Sunday march all on the same day! Along the road the shouts of joy had rung out, but the excitement simply ends with the day. The whole event seems to have fallen flat. Did something go wrong? What was Jesus up to? The people, at least a good number of them were enthusiastic and full of expectation, but why does Jesus seem to do nothing?

Jesus simply looks around at the temple and goes back to where he had come from. Jerusalem **does not receive her saviour**, despite the impressive build up. So the dynamic of this story is much like that of the rest of the gospel. Things don't go as expected. Jesus so often does the opposite of what seems logical. Power is inverted, the norms do not apply. Numbers are not what counts. The gates are open, the people cry out, but the branches are left on the road and the real events are of a different order.

This Palm Sunday story says clear and loud that Jesus will enter the public spheres of life, but not to do what we might expect. Jesus will come and disturb, confront and excite; not to take the city or us by force. He comes instead to signal a new and different way, a new kingdom founded on self giving, a new order that runs contrary to the world's norms and expectations. He embraces the last chapter of his life with the same dignity, the same hope and loving purpose Jesus has displayed through his life.

Jesus way, the Christian way, is quite different to commonly held outlooks on life. So different that I think it often comes as a shock and a surprise to us, not because we are ignorant, but because it is the nature of God and of the gospel, to surprise and shock us, to be presenting fresh challenges and never more so than in this season.

This week amidst sporting distraction and holiday commercialism, remember that ride to Jerusalem. A ride beginning with shouts of joy and acclamation but ending flat. And we might ponder what it tells us about Jesus way, about that riding on with purpose despite the danger.

The joy of Easter wasn't achieved with a grand entrance or even with the support of the crowds. The life brought to us through Easter comes through the sacrificial love of one man, Jesus of Nazareth, who calls us to follow his way in showing God's love to all.

Amen