

Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 5th April 2020

Palm Sunday



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots Resources

Come, pilgrim people. Come to worship the liberator and peacemaker who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Come to worship, pilgrim people.

As we gather for worship in our homes, bring your palms and branches, your shouts and praise.

Hosanna to the Son of David! Hosanna to the King of kings!
Let us journey to Jerusalem to worship the king who came to save us.

Amen

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 50 v4-9a (p737) Israel's Sin and the Servant's Obedience

Psalm 118 v1-2, 19-29 (p616) Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures for ever.

Philippians 2 v5-11 (p1179) Imitating Christ's Humility

Matthew 21 v1-11 (p988) The Triumphal Entry

Turning Point

This week our focus is on a community on the move and a city in turmoil.

Jesus enters Jerusalem as a Passover pilgrim for the last time, demonstrating how he brings in God's kingdom and setting the stage for the showdown with those he sees as God's real enemies. The prophet Isaiah, who sustained the weary with a word, yet at the cost of violence, insult and humiliation (Isaiah 50 v4-6), reminds us of the rabbi Jesus.

Why such opposition to one who brings God's word? Some of the prophet's own people would have found his message that foreigners were to benefit from God's blessing, unpalatable. And Babylonian officials would hardly have welcomed his opinion that their power had had its day.

What sustained such a prophet? First, he taught what he learned from God; his message was the fruit of habitual listening. Second, his ministry was not the outworking of his own abilities but the consequence of his confidence in God. He twice declares, 'the Lord helps me' (v7 & 9). Jesus and Paul (Romans 8.31 'If God is for us, who can be against us?') were among the many who entered into his experience.

The passage from Philippians 2 may be a hymn or poem that Paul has incorporated into his letter. Without taking anything away

from ‘the glory of God the Father’, Jesus Christ is worthy of universal acclaim, not for his authoritative teaching or compassionate healing but because ‘he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!’.

We can’t be sure what lies behind these words. Some suggest biblical wisdom poetry, where Wisdom (female) personifies God’s wise dealings with creation. Wisdom reaches out and ‘descends’ from her place beside God into the world, where she reveals God’s glory in Jesus’ human form. Others see a reflection of the story of Adam: Jesus’ self-emptying runs counter to Adam’s self-centred grasping after the very thing that God had denied him. Either way, the whole sweep of Jesus’ movement that culminates in his undeserved death is utterly gracious. He gives himself away for the glory of God, who honours him before all creation. ‘Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus’ (v5) – Paul hopes that worshippers will live the words they sing.

The Gospels give the impression that increasingly tense relationships between Jesus and the authorities form the backdrop to his last visit to Jerusalem. He sees this Passover as the stage for a decisive confrontation. His action in the Temple – its so-called ‘cleansing’ – was surely a flashpoint in an already volatile environment.

Jesus and his disciples arrive in Jerusalem with crowds of Passover pilgrims from all over the Jewish world. Inspired by the memory of Moses, their hearts and voices overflow with excitement and hope as they prepare to enact the Passover as their story of liberation. The inevitable strains on law and order draw in extra soldiers to keep the peace, which only serves to heighten the pilgrims’ hopes for freedom. They enter the city in what we would see as more of a ‘demo’ or ‘march’ than a pilgrimage walk, singing the Passover psalms (Psalms 115–118), from which the words in

verse 9 are drawn. Despite our assumptions, only John 12 v13 has the crowd waving palm branches (as their ancestors did when they cleansed the Temple two centuries earlier). Here the people put cloaks and branches on the road: garments to greet a king (2 Kings 9 v13) and branches fit for a festival of liberation (Leviticus 23 v40).

Jesus’ staged entry is performance art in true prophetic style. Matthew’s mention of a donkey and a colt (other Gospels have only a donkey) shows how much his account is shaped by his reading of Zechariah 9 v9 alongside Isaiah 62 v11; it is the latest in the series of fulfilment quotations that structure his narrative. By the choice of a donkey, Jesus contrasts himself with kings and generals who preferred horses and chariots. It is a moment when Jesus might well have been tempted to act differently – perhaps with the hope of becoming the political leader that so many were hoping for. Instead he acts out his vision of truly liberating leadership, entering the city of peace as a humble peacemaker, hungry only for righteousness and mercy (Matthew 5 v3-12 The Beatitudes).

The links between the readings

The reading from Isaiah reminds us that a prophet’s vocation is inevitably costly, never more so than in the case of Jesus, says the hymn in Philippians. Jesus’ humiliating death is full of grace, and according to Matthew’s account of his entry into Jerusalem a sure sign of God’s way of governing the world.

A Sending Out Prayer

Jesus, we journey with you today
as you journey with us, especially during these difficult times.
Let us go where you go.

Amen