

Palm Sunday Year C (Luke)

Little do you know how close you came this morning to being introduced to a new theological concept: an ecumenical donkey. Our local “churches together” organization decided it would be a good idea to have an animal from a nearby sanctuary which could make an appearance at as many Palm Sunday services in the city centre as possible. In the end, it didn’t work, because they did not manage to obtain the correct sort of donkey. The problem was not that the donkey was unecumenical – I’m sure it would have been an Anglican anyway – but that you need specially trained donkeys and handlers for processions. When it was clear no donkey would be forthcoming, I cannot tell you how relieved some of our servers were.

The donkey on which Jesus rides not only fulfils the prophecy of Zechariah, but also reminds us of another Biblical donkey, Balaam’s ass, a talking donkey which can see what its master cannot – that there is an angel in its path. A donkey which talks is one thing, but Luke presents us with the idea of a city which speaks. “If these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”

Most of Luke’s gospel has been leading up to this point. More than ten chapters earlier, Jesus began the lengthy journey to Jerusalem around which so much of the gospel is hung, and during which so many of our familiar parables are told – the good Samaritan and the prodigal son,

for example. This morning we heard the story of Jesus arrival in Jerusalem, and because it is also a familiar tale, we tend to miss a crucial detail in Luke’s account. The people, the residents of Jerusalem, do not cry out in welcome. The phrase is clear – the whole crowd of disciples cried out, not the whole multitude, but those who are already following Jesus. And the response of Jerusalem officialdom is also clear – Teacher, rebuke your disciples, is the complaint of the outraged Pharisees. But the real Jerusalem knows its King. In the golden age of David and his descendants, the anointing of the King by the prophet was followed by the acclamation of the people, events familiar to us via Zadok the Priest and other coronation anthems. Here in the Jerusalem of Jesus, it is those on the outside, those who are disciples, those who are entering the city, who make the acclamation. They are the true Israel, the genuine Jerusalem, so much so that if their voices were unheard, Jesus says, the very stones would cry out – the physical city itself would not stay silent, even though its inhabitants live in the darkness of their ignorance.

This King comes not with condemnation and violence, but with pity, with tears and with love. He sees the city from a distance and weeps over it, for it – the false Jerusalem – is a place of violence which knows nothing of forgiveness and of peace. But the irony of this ignorance is heavy, because this same Jerusalem – the false Jerusalem of the scribes and the Pharisees – will, in the end, acclaim its true

King. Those who now are shouting Hosanna will be gone, fled at the moment of crisis, false at the moment of truth. But those who now are silent, those who would rebuke the disciples, the mob of this violent city, will be the witnesses to his coronation, a crowning on the cross.

We are the crowd and the onlookers in this story. The question we must ask ourselves is whether or not we can see what is before our very eyes. Do we identify ourselves with the city dwellers who thought they'd seen it all before, or with the lifeless stones and the voiceless donkey who acknowledge their true King? As Holy Week begins, we are charged with welcoming and witnessing Jesus in the last days of his life, challenged to respond to his message of love, to watch with him as he approaches betrayal, agony and death, to stand by him as he is raised on high in the brutality which is crucifixion, to go to him as he lies lifeless in the tomb. Holy Week is our opportunity to see that which takes place before our very eyes, to open our minds and our hearts to the drama which alone gives meaning to your life and mine. Small wonder, then, that this week is demanding. Small wonder, then, that these ceremonies are strange. But ask yourself this: which would be stranger: a donkey which speaks and a city wall which cries out, or a crowd of people such as you and me being confronted with the love of God and condemning that love to death?