

PALM SUNDAY (2016) SERMON by RICHARD PITT

Intro

Good morning.

It's Palm Sunday

A time when the church remembers Jesus riding into Jerusalem. There is an air of celebration about it. Crowds cheering, waving palm branches, singing, excited. And if you look at your bibles a lot of translations describe it as 'The Triumphal Entry'.

Which begs the question – where is the triumph? If this is such a glorious triumph, what goes wrong? We begin with these cheering crowds but within a few days they turn on him. In less than a week Jesus will find himself betrayed by one of his own disciples, arrested by the high priest's guard, accused by the religious leaders, tried by the Roman governor, and sentenced to death. He is rejected by the leaders of his people. Deserted by his friends.

We have a problem

And it starts today with the question

Who do they think this man is?

Part 1 – Setting the Scene

Passover

So first we need some context.

Try and capture a little bit of the mind-set of a first century Jew. So I'd like you to imagine yourself in the scene. Pick a man or woman in this crowd on the way to Jerusalem and put yourself there.

And I want to start up on the Mount of Olives. A hill overlooking Jerusalem, to the east, where today's procession starts.

Two key ingredients to understand what is going on....

First

We are running up to Passover, the biggest of Jewish festivals. Passover is a key part of their national identity, the real defining feature. All nations have these

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things. Here in the UK it could be something like the Battle of Britain, a key moment that gives a nation identity.

And for the Jewish nation Passover is their foundation. It remembers God bringing them out of slavery in Egypt, calling them to Him.

It means

- Freedom
- Rescue from Slavery
- Their own land
- God choosing them as his people

It is a symbol of

- Rescue
- Salvation
- Freedom

And throughout their history, it has been remembered and celebrated.

But Passover doesn't just remember the past, it looks forward, it hopes for a future where it will happen again

God will send his Messiah, and will rescue them from slavery and oppression once more. Establishing a kingdom of peace and justice, it is a hope of

- Rescue
- Salvation
- Freedom

So the first thing to understand is Passover. Like us before Christmas, their focus is on it, they are thinking about it, preparing for it, and they are singing songs like the Psalm we heard in our first reading.

Psalm 118:19-29

¹⁹ *Open to me the gates of
righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.*

²⁰ *This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter
through it.*

²¹ *I thank you that you have
answered me*

and have become my salvation.

²² *The stone that the builders
rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.*

²³ *This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.*

²⁴ *This is the day that the LORD has
made;*

let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵ *Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!*

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O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶ *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.*

We bless you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷ *The LORD is God,*

and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with

branches,

up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸ *You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.*

²⁹ *O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,*

for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Occupations

The second thing to understand is Occupation.

First century Judea is under Roman occupation. A small nation, proud nation has endured repeated invasions.

Currently under Roman rule.

We sometimes remember the Monty Python sketch, “What have the Romans ever done for us”, but the reality was harsh.

Picture it;

A foreign military superpower has invaded and occupied your land. Taxes are oppressive. 30% plus import duties, sales taxes, and extra taxes on items such as salt. 30% might not sound bad, but for most of a population scraping a living as subsistence farmers it was enough to push them into a struggle for survival. And this wasn't for a welfare state, not for the NHS. Taxation was to support the legions of Rome.

Punishments were brutal and swift. Failure to pay taxes led to devastating consequences. The Romans would sometimes destroy an entire village for late payment and enslave or kill all its inhabitants.

And we know that Jesus was crucified. But He was not alone. It was the Roman's preferred method of execution, combining deterrence, punishment and political statement all in one. It has been estimated that the number of Jews killed through crucifixion in Roman Palestine was as high as 200,000 with 500 a day being killed during later rebellions.

And on this Palm Sunday there is likely to have been a second procession moving into Jerusalem.

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Roman historians record that the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, led a procession of Roman cavalry and centurions into the city of Jerusalem, They don't give the exact date... but it was leading up to Passover.

So from the western side of the city, the opposite from where Jesus is coming, there is a procession of Roman soldiers on horseback and on foot. Each soldier armour-clad, with swords and shields, spears and bows. Banners lifted high in the sun, drummers beating out the rhythm.

A statement. A show of force.

There have been several rebellions in Judea already...all crushed. The last, in 4BC had started about 5 miles from Nazareth. It had ended with both two towns, including Emmaus' being destroyed by the legions before they marched on to Jerusalem.

The Romans made their intolerance for rebellion well known. And so on this occasion, Pilate had travelled with his army from his preferred headquarters in Caesarea-by-the-Sea, to the stuffy, crowded, provincial capital.

Jerusalem.

Pilate's entry into Jerusalem was meant to send a message to anyone who might be plotting against the empire. To remind the Jews of what had happened the last time of a wide-scale uprising. To intimidate the Jews to think twice about joining such a rebellion.

End of Act 1

So this is where our scene opens.

On the one hand we have a nation preparing for a festival which recalls their rescue from Egypt, the military superpower of the day, and looks forward to the coming of a Messiah to establish a new kingdom. On the other we have a military superpower, efficient and brutal.

Part 2 – Their Messiah

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Let's go back to our crowd. In the passage it describes them shouting Hosanna, which is the Hebrew word **Ho'sain'na**.

Have a go...

It is in both Psalm 118 (Hebrew) and in our reading from Mark (Greek). Now the Psalm was written in Hebrew, and it has been translated. In Mark, the Greek was translated, but this one word was left in Hebrew... Mark felt that it was important enough to show the original link... it means **'God Save Us'**. For the first time we see people calling out to Jesus directly...crying **'God Save Us'**.

Why brings even more questions...

Why now, what suddenly identifies Jesus as the Messiah...

And 'Save us from what'?

For this we need to look at an unlikely hero of the story...

The Donkey

Often associated with humility. And it is – you wouldn't ride into battle on a donkey, would you?

If Pilate's procession was meant as a show of military might and strength, Jesus' procession shows the opposite. Pilate, leading Roman centurions, asserts the power and might of the empire of Rome which crushes all who oppose it.

Jesus, riding on a young donkey, embodies the peace and tranquillity that the shalom that God brings to His people.

It is a declaration of a different sort of Power, that doesn't rely of force or intimidation.

But it also has huge symbolism for the Jews. Both Matthew and Mark record Jesus' own words, He tells his disciples to go in to the city and find a donkey tied up. They are to ask the owner if they may use the donkey, and they are to say that "the Lord needs them."

Worth pausing for a second here.....because this is clearly no accident.

This is pre-arranged.

Jesus has very deliberately set this up and organized it.

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A donkey was hugely expensive, this is like borrowing a car.... You wouldn't just take it....

So Jesus send his disciples to pick up the donkey and

Then, Jesus quotes from Zechariah, the 9th chapter –

⁵ *“Say to the Daughter of Zion, ‘See, your King comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”*

But, there is more to this passage than the donkey.

The prophet Zechariah is speaking to the nation and in this chapter he reassures the people that God has not forgotten them:

⁸ *But I will defend my house against marauding forces. Never again will an oppressor overrun my people, for now I am keeping watch.*

⁹ *Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

¹⁰ *I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

Remember, these are people who know their old testament. Who study it. Whose nation is founded on it. And it Passover. They are even more switched on than normal. Jesus' quote from the prophet Zechariah reminded those who heard him of the entire passage.

The message was clear.....

“God will deliver the nation from the oppressor”.

It's a huge gesture and it seems to be recognised They start shouting Hosanna....

“God Save Us”

Save us from what?

The Oppressors

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The Romans

Their hopes are up... The Messiah is here!

We will soon be free and have our land back!

We will be wealthy and peaceful and everyone will respect us

The crowds are cheering....

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

They are placing their faith in Jesus

Faith that he would restore the glory of the nation.

The glory of when David and his son, Solomon, ruled a United Kingdom.

Even the disciples think so...

Even after the resurrection they think so

Part 3 – Their Disillusionment

So what happens?

Psalms 118 clearly describes what was supposed to happen next...

It describes a journey to the temple, which welcomes the king....

They are expected action – against the Romans.

Against the people who are occupying their country.....

But here it all goes wrong.

Jesus does not challenge the Romans.

Jesus challenges the religious rulers.

He cleanses the temple of the money lenders.

He challenges the chief priests, telling the parable of the Talents Describing them as landlords who ignore their master and finally kill his son.

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And finally is arrested by the religious rulers.... Not the Romans.

Even when he is arrested he asks “Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?”

The religious rulers condemn him to death and pass him to the Romans.

Pilate tries him and declares that he finds no guilt

The Messiah is declared not a threat to Rome!

And so the crowd free Barabbas....Because

Barabbas is the type of Messiah they were hoping for. He was a part of a group rising up against the Romans. Fighting against them, relying on military force and violence...

The problem is of course that Barabbas was not God.

A contrast between kingdom was on display. Although many people in the crowd on Palm Sunday thought they sided with Jesus, they were actually putting their own plans onto Jesus.

They thought Jesus would make their lives better and they were right but not for the reasons they thought.

They thought he would save them from the oppressive system under which they lived and worked.

Drive out the Romans. Give them their country back. And by Thursday they don't think he is going to do any of those things. Jesus is going to make life worse for them, not better.

And their leaders, Pharisees & Sadducees & supporters of Herod, who normally never agreed on anything, all agree that Jesus is causing trouble.

They may not enjoy Roman rule, but they aren't struggling to survive. They have found ways to make it benefit them. And Jesus is threatening their power, undermining their authority, their wealth, their influence. And in stirring up hopes of the Messiah, they are worried that Rome will come down fast and hard on the entire nation. (See Caiaphas' speech in John 11:45-50).

So, when Jesus is accused, when he is brought by Pilate before the angry mobs, they want to be rid of him.

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Jesus, in their minds, never did what they wanted him to do. He didn't mount a campaign against the Romans, and he didn't reinforce the authority of the temple, and he never would.

The crowd on Palm Sunday didn't turn on Jesus, they weren't ever really with him. They were supporting their own idea of Jesus, rather than the reality.

Jesus was their Messiah and they hung their hopes and dreams and ambitions on him. And were left disillusioned when he failed to live up to them.

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Part 4 – Our Response

Those who watched that Palm Sunday had to make a choice, a choice between their picture of God, their ideas, their goals, and God himself.

The same is true for us.

We can fail to recognise God because we are so focused on our own ambitions.

We can fall into the trap of thinking that our ambitions are God's ambitions, that our worthy cause, is God's worthy cause. That our plan for our life, is God's plan for our life.

We can choose to serve ourselves and the patterns of this world.

Money, security, power, influence. We can take good things too far, idolising family, fitness and health, or relationships.

Or we can put down our ideas, or choose to serve a very different kind of messiah.

Every time we fail to recognise God, by replacing him with our own ideas of what he is supposed to be like, we risk doing the same.

When God threatens our wealth for the sake of loving generosity, when God fails to support our goals, our own interests, we can change from cheering to condemnation.

When God shakes our authority, out of fear or what we might lose, we can change from cheering to condemnation.

When we feel let down, we can change from cheering to condemnation.

Wrap Up

So to come back to our questions,

Who is this man?

He is the Messiah.

Everything they had ever hoped for.

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So why does the crown turn on him?

Because they failed to understand what God was up to. And that Jesus was fulfilling God's plan, not theirs. He was not theirs to control.

So in what way is this a triumph, why do we remember and celebrate Palm Sunday?

We celebrate because it is triumph subverted.

An anti-triumph. A triumph that reveals God. A God who ignores pomp and splendour. A God who acts from love rather than status, who acts from faithfulness rather than short-term gain.

We celebrate Palm Sunday as it is the start of the answer of what Jesus is up to. He is on his way to the cross.

We celebrate Palm Sunday because it helps us realise that God's understanding of triumph is miles from our own.

We celebrate Palm Sunday because it demonstrates a different kind of kingdom, based on love and sacrifice rather than pomp and circumstance.

So this week, when we approach God, we need to leave our pre-conceived ideas at the door.

God is not bound by our expectations, but He is unbounded in love.

If we let Him he will bless us more than we can believe possible.

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I would like to finish with a reflection based on one by theologian, Paula Gooder;

We cry Hosanna,

and praise you for all your acts of goodness in days gone by

We cry Hosanna

and plead for salvation still to come far off in the future

We cry Hosanna

but we're not sure we meant now,

and here is a little inconvenient,

and we certainly didn't mean like this.

We cry Hosanna

praying that the salvation when it comes will be comfortable,
predictable and safe,

that it won't tax us too far,

won't be inconvenient in its demands

We cry Hosanna

but it takes Jesus bringing himself in sacrifice

to pour down true Hosannas.

So we cry Hosanna

looking backwards in thanksgiving and forwards in hope

embrace right now, all that Jesus came to be

Hosannas based not on what we want Jesus to be, but on who he was and is.

And as the Hosannas fade away beneath the shadow of the cross, and Jesus offers the salvation that so many have cried out for, and then suddenly weren't sure if they wanted after all.

Help us hold on to him and continue to cry

HOSANNA!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.