

Thought for the Week 28th March 2021

READING MATTHEW 21: 1 – 11

¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, 'Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.'

⁴ This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet: ⁵ 'Say to Daughter Zion, "See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!'

'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'

'Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, 'Who is this?' ¹¹ The crowds answered, 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.'

The Turn of the Road

Have you ever driven down a road, thinking you were heading in the right direction for your destination, only to wind up somewhere else? At one time or another, I'm sure we've all thought that a road was taking us in certain direction, when in reality we were going somewhere else. And that brings us to Palm Sunday.

The Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem

We probably know this story really well, and so it is easy for us to think just like those in Jerusalem that day — that Palm Sunday is taking us somewhere else, when in reality we're on a different road. A road we might not choose. A road we had not planned on. A road we do not welcome.

The crowds on that day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem were ready for a change – they were looking for a new way. The oppression of the Roman empire lay heavy on them just like the Egyptian captivity from which their forefathers had been delivered. It was Passover week, after all. The time when they remembered that great deliverance. Emotions were running high, plans were being made to gather in homes, and rented rooms to share a subversive meal. This Passover meal appeared to be about an ancient story, a tradition, that celebrated the deliverance of the people of Israel from an evil tyrant, the Pharaoh of Egypt. It was about remembering Moses, chosen by God to lead his people out of captivity, and how he had instructed the Hebrew people to gather together whatever possessions they could carry in hand, to get their garments ready for travel, and have their staves in their hands. They were to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on the door posts of their houses and wait for God's deliverance.

And deliverance came. The death angel passed over Egypt, and all over that land death visited every Egyptian household, taking the future of Egypt with it. Wailing could be heard rising from town after town. The will to resist the God of Israel had faded. Pharaoh relented, and God's people were free. It was a temporary freedom, as Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued the nation of Israel, but God continued to protect his people as they safely crossed the Red Sea. They had slipped in the dark of night from the chains of slavery with the guidance of God. They were free.

It was that same hope of freedom that the crowds in Jerusalem longed for so many centuries later. And they invested that hope in Jesus that day he came riding in. Of course, he knew that he was popular. After all, he had fed people, healed people, raised the dead, made the lepers whole, rebuked the Pharisees, preached in a way that spoke to the people but confounded the theologians. He had captivated the hearts of the people. It was not the first time the crowds had searched for a leader who would throw off Roman oppression, and it would not be the last. But Jesus seemed different. A bit of a mystic, and yet a mystic who stayed with common people, who ate with tax collectors, who forgave women of poor reputations and even played with children, as well as teaching the vast crowds who came out to hear him.

And while Jesus didn't say anything directly about overthrowing Roman rule — and he had even suggested they should pay the taxes that were owed to Caesar — surely he must have implied it. After all, he seemed to fear no one. And the Pharisees, the chief priests and the other religious leaders all feared his popularity. Of course the people knew that those super-pious religious Jewish leaders had actually betrayed their own people, as had the puppet kings of Judea such as Herod. The less popular they were, the more popular Jesus became.

On that Sunday morning, when Jesus came into Jerusalem, he wasn't riding on a big white horse, but on a plain little donkey. But the people knew their scriptures, they knew that A couple of centuries earlier it was prophesied by Zechariah (9:9) that the Messiah would come in exactly this way:

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.

The donkey was the royal animal of the Jewish monarchs and in riding upon one, Jesus was clearly stating that he was the rightful heir to the kingdom, so those who were in Jerusalem took up the chant, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna! ("Save us!") The road to kingship, to freedom, to the overthrow of Rome seemed to be the road Jesus was riding that day.

A Different Road, A Different Destination

But the Jerusalem road on Palm Sunday for Jesus was not the road to freedom. It was the road to sacrifice. It was not the road to power, it was the road to humility. It was not the road to fame, it was the road to death. It was not the road the crowd thought it should be – but it was the road God had planned.

In our celebration of the wonder of Palm Sunday, we could easily forget that only a few short days later Jesus will be betrayed, arrested, tried, abandoned, whipped, spit upon, slapped, have his beard torn out, be scourged, tortured with a crown of thorns, mocked, ridiculed, and ultimately killed. And the same crowds that had sung Hosannas at his arrival, would shout for Pilate to release Barabbas and put Jesus to death. This road had taken a different turn, it had led to a different destination.

Isaiah writing 600 years before Jesus penned inspired words that are both prophetic and descriptive. In chapter 53 Isaiah paints a portrait of the Suffering Servant as one whose back will be beaten, whose beard will be plucked out, whose face will be spat upon, and who will be mocked. All those things happened to Jesus. All, and more. And why? Because the road that Jesus trod was the same road he had always walked. It was the road of humility, of love, of patience, of hope, of encouragement. It was the way of salvation, not the way of empire. It was the way of the kingdom, not of the king. It was the road to glory, not to government. It was the way of righteousness, not of Rome.

And in a perfect world a man who did nothing but good, who relieved suffering, who comforted the mourning, who sat with the sorrowful, who ate with sinners, who made the broken whole — in a perfect world such a man would be honoured, praised, loved, and revered. After all, we give awards to people today who do those good things. We call them MBEs or give them Nobel Prizes, or we name parks or streets or schools in their honour. But for Jesus no such honours were forthcoming.

The Weary Turn Away

In their confusion, and anger, and fear those who on Sunday had welcomed Jesus as their new messiah-to-be, by Friday had turned on him, weary of disappointment, weary of themselves, weary of their lives. Frustrated and tired of all the things they could not control, they cried out for vengeance that they could control. "If Jesus will not be our king and overthrow Roman oppression, then let's be rid of him," they said.

But Isaiah had written six centuries before, that this servant of God knew the word that sustained the weary. That word was, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." And so, when the road in Jerusalem changed from triumph to torture, Jesus stayed on it. When the shouting of the crowds moved from joy to judgment, Jesus stayed on it. When the mood of the mob switched from adoration to accusation, Jesus didn't flinch. When the road became rough, steep, and lonely, Jesus kept going.

All the way from the gates of Jerusalem, through the streets of the city, into the halls of judgment, down the dark alleys of hatred, out on the other side to the place of the skull. Jesus walked a road whose end he knew, whose destination was no surprise, whose journey took him not to the crown room, but to the cross.

And though the weary turned away, Jesus did not. His word would sustain the weary, give rest to the restless, provide peace to the strife-torn. His word was his life, his journey, his sacrifice, his violent death, his sinless life, his self-giving love.

That is the road of this week.

The road that takes us to where Jesus has been.

The road that leads to the cross. But that (as we shall see) is not the end of the road.

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

PCI Let's Pray

Monday 29 March

Naomi Leremore (global mission worker in Kenya)

Ask for God's blessing on the Theological Education by Extension's curriculum team which Naomi is part of, as they design a mentoring book for girls. Pray over their first meeting which will take place in April and for the preparation work needing to be done beforehand.

Myanmar

Pray for Myanmar following the recent military coup and protests against it. Pray for peace and for the restoration of democracy. Pray too for the leaders and members of the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar.

Tuesday 30 March

Paula Burrows (deaconess in Ballygrainey)

Pray for Paula and the work she is involved in which includes the Lighthouse Club, Tweenies group, women's discipleship (through PW and other small group settings) and developing mission opportunities in the community through Holiday Bible Clubs, Bangor Cares, etc.

Galway Presbyterian Church

Pray that online services and gatherings would be used for God's glory. Pray for the leaders, for youth and student work, for those doing online membership classes and for children's ministry. Pray for revival in the West.

Wednesday 31 March

Derek & Jane French (global mission workers in Spain)

Pray for Derek for a quick and successful recovery from a recent operation. Pray too for Bilbao International Church and the leadership team as they take on more responsibility and for those coming to the church who are seeking, that they will come to faith in Christ.

Malawi

Pray for the Student Christian Organisation of Malawi and Scripture Union Malawi as they spread the gospel to children and teenagers in Malawi and seek to disciple young Christians in their Christian faith.

Thursday 1 April

Hospital chaplains

Pray for protection, strength and stamina for PCI hospital chaplains. Pray for all those ill in hospital, for a full and quick recovery and that patients who don't have Covid-19 will be protected from it. Pray too for staff working in very challenging conditions and for families whose visits are restricted.

Gortin Presbyterian Church

Pray for the congregation as it approaches a second year of being vacant. Pray for the members as they look forward to meeting again to worship together in person and for wisdom in calling a new minister.

Good Friday 2 April

Hope at Easter

On this Good Friday, why not take some time to pause in the course of the day to consider the words of the Centurion who while guarding the cross and witnessing the events on the day of Jesus' death said. "Surely he was the Son of God!" He died for me.

Hope at Easter

The Church Leaders will be leading an act of worship on Easter Sunday, which will be broadcast on television by BBC Northern Ireland. Pray that the message of hope emerging from the cross and resurrection would be heard and understood by all who watch.

Saturday 3 April

Hope at Easter

The Moderator will offer a pre-recorded service of worship this Easter which may be used in congregations across the Church. Pray that this would be a blessing to many. Thank God for the provision of technology to enable us to meet online.

Hope at Easter

Pray for the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, and his Coalition Government in the Republic. Pray for the NI First Minister, Arlene Foster and the Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill, as they seek to lead the Northern Ireland Executive. Pray for the NI Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis.