

SERMON – 29/3/26
'This is Jesus'

Matthew 21:1-17

“When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred.”
(Matt. 21:10)

Whether we are conscious of it or not, we all approach the events of each day with certain expectations. We get up in the morning expecting the sun to rise. We set about our daily tasks with a rough idea of what we think is going to happen. And normally, things proceed as we anticipate they will. When they don't, of course, we sometimes have a bad reaction – we are disappointed that the shop doesn't have something that we went in for; we are annoyed that the bus is late. When our expectations are overturned, we may not always be very happy about it, although occasionally new possibilities open up for us as a result – we discover something new at the shop that we have never tried before and lunchtime is transformed; because our bus has been delayed we end up chatting to someone and develop a new friendship. What expectations did you have as you came to church this morning, I wonder?

The passage that we read this morning from Matthew's Gospel is one which will be familiar to all of us. It's one of those passages that is read in our churches without fail at least once a year, and more than that, it is one of those stories that sticks easily in people's minds from the youngest to the oldest because it is such a visual one – the climax of Jesus' earthly ministry is approaching; He makes His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey, with a great crowd spreading their cloaks before Him, strewing the road with branches cut from the palm trees and welcoming Him with loud acclamations; he strides into the Temple courts and causes a real stramash as He overturns the tables of the money-changers and drives out those who were trading there; the blind are given their sight back, the lame are made to walk again and the authorities are reduced to indignation as the children take up the shouts of praise. It is all told so vividly that most of us probably have quite a strong picture of the action etched into our imagination.

Most of us will also probably have heard many sermons on the events of Palm Sunday – I have certainly preached a few – and although we may not remember every detail of them, they will probably have left more than we might imagine in the way of background knowledge stored in the filing cabinets of our memory banks.

We will have had pointed out to us the significance of the fact that Jesus rode on a donkey rather than some grander animal like a horse or camel – this is the lowly Christ who will become the Servant King and not the David-like Messiah that the Jews expected to restore their fortunes and rule the whole world. Nonetheless, this *is* the Messiah, recognised by the crowds as the Son of David as they sing to Him, ‘Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’ words taken from the festival psalm 118.

We will have had described to us the kind of scene that Jesus found in the temple courts, a building that was supposed to be a gathering-place for pilgrims, a place of preparation for worship, a place of teaching and contemplation, but which had been turned into little more than a market full of stalls where institutionalised fraud was perpetrated on those who had come from all over the country with their offerings to present to God. It was not good enough to bring your own animals to sacrifice (even though that was what the Law of Moses had intended to happen) – you had to buy special animals at highly inflated prices. It was not even enough to bring the tithes and offerings from your own harvest to place in the temple storehouses – you had to exchange your money and produce into a special currency and of course there was a high rate of commission to pay.

We will have been shown the contrast between the attitude of the children who happily sang the praises of Jesus as He cleared the Temple of the traders and as He healed the sick, and the indignation of the authorities as they saw their vested interests being challenged by this trouble-maker from up North. In each case, we will have been pointed to the Old Testament verses that Matthew quotes – the words of the prophet Zechariah about a king coming, gentle and riding on a donkey; the words of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah about the Lord’s house of prayer

having become nothing more than a den of robbers; the words of King David the psalmist about God ordaining praise out of the mouth of babes. We have been shown how Jesus, by His coming, fulfils the ancient prophecies.

We know all that, in more or less detail – it's there in our sub-conscious. But what I'd like to suggest to you this morning is that its very familiarity has the potential to take away the sharp edge of its message to us. Oh yes, we know the Palm Sunday story – we can tick that one off on our checklist and we can relax because we are on familiar territory.

Hold on, though, because this is God's Word to us today, and we should be wary of just letting it wash over us like a soothing bath. If we put ourselves in the shoes of the religious authorities of Jesus' time, then the message of this passage ought to hit us like the jet of a cold shower in the morning and wake us all up.

Here we are, the tired 21st century remnant of western Christendom, with familiar expectations of the practice of our religion, even the most forward-looking of us rather comfortably set in our ways. We give a passing theological nod to the idea that Jesus comes and stands among us when we gather in His name. How, though, does Jesus make His triumphal entry here this morning and what does He do – what do we *allow* Him to do – in our midst? Do we tend to think of the arrival of Jesus in the same way as we might think about the arrival of the monarch on a state occasion, or like the arrival of liberating forces in a formerly occupied country? Maybe the message of this Palm Sunday story should overturn our expectations – maybe we are looking in the wrong direction for Jesus if it is splendour and power that we have in view. Maybe we have missed Him already, slipping in by the back door or sitting by our side in the person of the friend or the stranger. Perhaps we have altogether too grand an expectation of Jesus' coming.

Or perhaps it's the very opposite. When Jerusalem was stirred by Jesus' arrival, the cry went up: 'Who is this?' and the answer came back from the excited crowds: 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.' For some in the city, that response would have raised the sentiment that is expressed elsewhere in the Gospels: 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' While

sometimes we expect too grand a Jesus, conversely and paradoxically we often play down people's expectations of the Lord's presence and of His works – it's *just* Jesus. We rather glibly sometimes make 'for Jesus' sake' or 'in Jesus' name' into a mere form of words to signal the end of a prayer instead of a real taking hold of the power and the promises of the Most High; we speak more of the ordinary man Jesus, the tame Jesus, gentle Jesus meek and mild, the child in the manger, and less of the Son of God, the Jesus who walked on the water and stilled the storm, who healed the sick and raised the dead. Perhaps we have too *lowly* an expectation of Jesus. Maybe this Palm Sunday passage should overturn our expectations and should take us from being a people who follow Jesus the prophet, the teacher, the good man, to being the people who confess Jesus to be none other than the Lord Himself, the very Son of God.

Of course, our expectations of the person of Jesus Himself are crucial, but there are another couple of expectations we have as members of the Church that I think are overturned by the message of this morning's passage, expectations we have about the nature of the Church.

First, I think that many of us actually have too worldly an expectation of what the Church is all about. Because of our familiarity with the passage we have read this morning, it seems obvious to us that a church should not be turned into a marketplace where the clanging of cash registers drowns out the sound of singing and the offering of prayer (although a visit to some cathedrals might make you wonder!) But it's usually more subtle than that – in many places in this country the church is more renowned for its fetes and its coffee mornings than it is for its worship. The sound of the request for bric-a-brac and baking is more familiar to people than the call to prayer and the time devoted at church meetings to matters of fabric and finance eclipses any discussion of mission or outreach. Of course the roof need to be kept in good repair and the bills need to be paid but when we come to expect that that is the *top* priority in the church's affairs, I fear we have lost our way. I suspect that the Jesus who overturned the tables in the temple courts has something equally radical to do among us. Perhaps there is a

still, small voice that we are missing amidst the clamour of our busyness. 'My house shall be called a house of prayer.'

And second, I think many of us have too ordered or organised an expectation of the Church. Most of us are creatures of habit and we find it helpful to have order and organisation in our lives – our worship-life included. I don't want to put that down, because it is valuable. But again, it comes down to a question of priorities – when our ordered religion begins to quench the Holy Spirit, then we have become too organised. For the Temple authorities in Jerusalem, when the exuberance of the children's shouting and singing in the presence of Jesus disturbed the accepted practices of the worshipping community, there was indignation and outrage. We have all had experience of something we consider to be inappropriate interrupting our ordered experience of God – our reaction is often one of indignation, that *our* finely-tuned worship has been upset. Perhaps we need to allow those upsets to become pointers for us to a fresh understanding of the things of God. Perhaps, by overturning our expectations, the disturbing wind of the Spirit is actually turning us up the right way!

The triumphant and yet unconventional arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem shook many people in the city, both those in authority and those who were pilgrims visiting for the Feast of Passover – religious people, faithful people, people who were genuinely seeking after the Kingdom of God, in fact people like us. Perhaps we need to put to one side our familiar Palm Sunday expectations and allow Jesus to come to *us* in the same earth-shattering way here and now, today. Just as the Lord strode into the temple courts and overturned the tables, we need to allow Him to have His way among us and overturn whatever it is in our lives as individuals and as a church that is preventing us from being the people He longs us to be.

As we gather this morning, are we prepared to have our expectations of God completely overturned? If we are expecting all the splendour of a royal visit, may we encounter the Saviour today in surprising lowliness; if we are here expecting an experience of close and tender fellowship with our Friend and Brother Jesus, may we find ourselves staggeringly humbled in the presence of the King of Glory; if we are normally conscious of the

outward things in worship may we find ourselves touching things unseen here this morning and may this place truly be a house of prayer for all people; if we are usually caught up in the spiritual aspects of Christian fellowship, may we become powerfully aware of Jesus Himself in the very disturbances that normally irritate us.

“When Jesus entered Jerusalem,” we read, “the whole city was stirred.” That word is normally used of earthquakes. When He died on the cross a few days later, there actually *was* an earthquake – the earth shook, the rocks split, the tombs broke open and the dead were raised. May we be truly shaken by Christ’s presence among us today, in every sense of that word.