

"THIS IS JESUS, FROM NAZARETH"

Matthew 21:1-11

It's holiday time. You've come up from the south to Jerusalem for the Festival. This time you're here with your family - the first time since you moved away after getting married. You don't live far away - just outside Bethlehem - but there haven't been many opportunities to get back to see the rest of the family. Mum and dad have been so excited seeing their grandchildren for the first time - and the kids are high as kites, what with all the fuss that's being made of them and all the things that are going on in the city.

You've left the rest of them together at your parents' house and have come down here, near the walls, to see some old friends. The streets are full of pilgrims, although there's still several days until the Festival really gets under way. People seems to be streaming through the gates all the time - not just the usual merchants with their camels and carts and donkeys and horses, herding their sheep and their goats in towards the markets. There are also the holidaymakers - some here for their annual visit; some staring wide-eyed in amazement as they look round the city for the very first time; some, like yourself, greeting old friends with cries of joy.

There are little groups of musicians in some of the squares, enjoying the sunshine as they run over the songs you'll all be singing come next weekend. Children are running around squealing with delight at the wonderful trinkets and baubles the street traders are hawking to the visitors. There are little booths here and there selling snacks and drinks - the kind of thing you haven't tasted since you were a child. Everyone seems to be in a good mood, and there's the same kind of expectation in the air that you can remember from when you used to run around these streets as a child during the days leading up to Peshach.

It seems that everyone is putting all their energy into preparing for the festival. And why not? It's the high point of the year - the high point of the last several years for you. On Thursday evening you'll sit down with your mum and dad, and your own little family - some uncles and aunts and cousins are coming as well, apparently - and you'll remember the time when God liberated your ancestors from Egypt, the time when his angel of death passed over the houses of the Hebrews and struck down the Egyptian oppressors. It's the high point of your national heritage. An awful lot of history has passed since then: kings have risen and fallen; the whole nation has been deported and then brought back; invaders have been and gone; atrocities have taken place; rebellions have occurred. But somehow God has been looking after the people all through the centuries.

If only he would fulfil his promise to send a Messiah. Everyone expects that it will happen during Peshach - after all, that's the time when everyone is at their most religious, their most obedient to God. That's the time when everyone - but everyone - keeps the Feast and observes the Sabbath. There's a sense of anticipation in the air - as there always is this week - that this is the year when it's going to happen. You've already passed a few preachers up near the Temple, telling people to get ready for God's chosen one. In fact, there were a couple of them actually claiming to be the Messiah themselves - but the wild look in their eyes and their slurred speech meant that many people were giving them a wide berth. Not much chance of them being the Messiah (not that they could both be, anyway!).

As you get near your friend's house down by the city walls, you see a crowd coming through the nearby gate. It's not simply another horde of pilgrims who've been travelling together. Some of them seem to be Jerusalem people: others are clearly from up north - you can hear it in their voices. But they're all cheering and waving. In fact, there are some who are cutting branches off the trees just outside the gate, palm branches. Well, that's an obvious sign of celebration: you only do that when there's something very special to get worked up about.

And some of them are spreading cloaks and blankets out across the lane, like a kind of carpet. It seems as though they're making a special passage for someone. They did that for one of the old kings - yes, it was Jehu, when he was anointed king; you read about it once in one of the history books in the Hebrew Scriptures. Obviously someone very important is going to arrive. You climb up a couple of steps that lead up on to the walls to get a better view - and there, in the middle of the crowd, you can see him. It's difficult to make out his features as yet, but he's riding on a ... on a donkey.

Well, with all that shouting and cheering you'd at least have expected a horse or a chariot with some plumed and armoured hero being carried along. This looks just like a youngish rabbi. Hang on, though! Maybe this is a Messiah. Wasn't there something in one of the prophets - Zechariah, you seem to remember - about a donkey? It was read a couple of weeks ago in the synagogue. Something along the lines of, "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." Well, it's donkey, alright. And the rider has a gentle kind of look about him.

You're not the only one to make the connection. There are people walking alongside the donkey, and some standing up the sides of the lane who are shouting out bits from the Psalms - "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Some of them must know what's going on, they must have some reason for welcoming him as Messiah. After all, all those old prophecies said that the Messiah would be a Son of David, and the Messiah is going to come in the name of the Lord - that's what it means, anyway - "the Anointed One, the one the Lord has chosen."

But who is it? There's no point asking the people who've climbed up the steps with you: they're all asking the same question. Who on earth can it be? As you look around you can see that some of the local bigwigs have come out to watch. They've got all the posh clothes and funny headgear of the Pharisees and the other religious leaders. They must be pretty strict in terms of religion because they've got those little phylacteries strapped to their arms and heads - the little leather pouches with bits of the scriptures inside. And they don't look very happy at all. In fact, they're looking decidedly angry. One of them's shouting at the man on the donkey - it sounds like he's telling him to stop the noise. What a daft thing to say! You're not going to get any quiet during Passover week, especially not if they all think this could be the Messiah. The man on the donkey's shouting back. "There's no point," he's saying. "If I get them to shut up, even the stones you're standing on will shout out." That's upset them. They seem to be more annoyed about his popularity than anything else: "It looks like the whole world's being seduced by him," says the man immediately below you.

But who is he? Bethlehem might not be that far from Jerusalem, but you don't get a lot of news down there. You don't fancy asking the Pharisee who's just asked them all to be quiet: he doesn't sound too sympathetic and you might get more than you bargained for. Hang on! The crowd are starting to chant something different - "Jesus! Jesus! The prophet from Nazareth! Jesus! Jesus! The prophet from Nazareth!" That's up in Galilee: no wonder you haven't heard much about him.

The crowd has slowed right down now as they try to funnel into the narrow lane inside the walls. This Jesus fellow is right below you and you can see him clearly. The crowd are still cheering and chanting and singing. But he's crying. He's actually weeping. It's not tears of joy either. He's shouting out some kind of lament for Jerusalem. Maybe he really is a prophet. Maybe he really is the Messiah. Maybe he really is the person everyone has been waiting for.

There's no way you'll be able to follow the crowd. They're packed so tightly into the lane that you can't get down from the steps. You wait until they've passed on up between the buildings and then nip down to your friend's house which is only a few yards from the gate. There's lots to talk about, lots to catch up on - but Jesus' last words are going round in your mind - "you didn't recognise the time of God's coming to you."

It's five days later. Last night, the Passover meal, was great, but, as always, as well as being very solemn in places, it was a great celebration and the effect of the wine's still making your head a bit muzzy, so you've gone out for a stroll in the early morning sunshine to let it clear a bit. As you come round into one of the big squares outside the governor's residence, you come across another crowd. The Roman governor - Pontius Pilatus - is out on the steps talking to the crowd. He's got two people with him. One's in chains: the other one is dressed up to look like a king, but his face is all beaten up and bloody, and the crown on his head seems to be made of those great long thorns you find on the bushes out in the hills. It's a familiar face, for all that. Who is it?

The governor is telling the crowd that they have a choice. It's festival time, so he's going to let one of the two prisoners go. Do they want the one on his left - Barabbas, it sounds like? You've heard of him - a very nasty piece of work indeed. Or do they want this Jesus? That's it! The man on the donkey! You look at the crowd and recognise a few faces from last Sunday. Those who were hanging around on the edge of the crowd looking very annoyed then are right at the front now. They're chanting for Barabbas. Round the edge, looking a bit sheepish, are some of the people who were cheering alongside Jesus as he came through the gate. They look totally gutted, as if the bottom has fallen out of their world. The governor has got the message about Barabbas. So what do the crowd want him to do with Jesus? There's a murmur from within the crowd. It's a bit like ripples spreading outwards, getting louder and clearer. As the shout of "Crucify him!" reaches the edge of the square, those on the margins of the crowd turn and walk away. Some of them - big blokes, too: they look like fishermen some of them - are in tears. This Jesus certainly stirs up some emotions, doesn't he? But if he's up there, all trussed up like a chicken now, blood-soaked and bruised, he doesn't seem very likely to be the Messiah.

The rest of the family have decided they'll spend the afternoon resting, so you think you might as well follow the little crowd that's making its way out to Golgotha, to Skull Hill. It's a great name for a place of execution; but it's called that because, from a distance, the pock marks in the hillside make it look just like a skull. That's where they're going to kill this Jesus and two other criminals. People around you are talking about Jesus. There doesn't seem to be any doubt in anyone's mind that he's innocent of the crimes he's supposed to have committed, but there's a bit of a difference of opinion about whether he's a trouble maker who could be usefully disposed of anyway.

By the time you reach Skull Hill, they've actually nailed the three men up on the crosses. It is a horrific way to die - agonisingly slow and incredibly painful. You don't know why you're standing there: you feel almost ashamed of your interest. The soldiers have all gone and there are a couple of groups of people standing around - Gosh! it's gone cold, all of a sudden. From one of the groups you can hear a few random obscenities being shouted. They're jeering this man. The other group stands in almost complete silence, a silence broken every now and then by a sob. Hey! The sun's gone in. It's the middle of the day, too. In the gloom you can just see the silhouette of the Roman officer as he steps out from behind one of the crosses. They always leave one soldier, just to check no-one tries to release any of the victims before they're dead - and to make sure that they are actually dead. Jesus is shouting out - screaming, in fact. It sounds like he's calling for Elijah. No, he's asking God to take his soul. It's the end for him. The centurion looks up at him, then falls to his knees with his hands in the air. "There's no doubt that this really was the Son of God" he cries out. He seems ashamed to be a part of it all, but at the same time delighted to have recognised him. It's almost as if he was praising God.

That's it! It's all falling into place. All the prophecies from the Scriptures. All the things you saw and heard last Sunday. The bits and pieces you've heard read in the synagogue - and some of the stuff you recited with the family at the meal last night. This is Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of God. And now he's gone. That phrase you heard Jesus saying last Sunday between the sobs as he entered the city comes back to you now: *"You didn't recognise the time of God's coming to you."*

That is the Jesus whose death we will commemorate next Friday, whose resurrection we'll celebrate next Sunday - that Jesus is your Saviour. That Jesus can make an eternal difference in your life. You've had plenty of opportunities to respond to him. This morning there's another one. What are you going to do? Pass it up again? Ignore him without trying to find out a bit more? Walk away without asking for his help? You have no idea what will happen to you once you leave this place this morning: it may possibly be the last opportunity you get. "Who is it?" you ask. "This is Jesus, from Nazareth," is the reply. He can transform your life. Don't spend the rest of eternity with his words ringing in your ears, "You didn't recognise the time of God's coming to you." Recognise it - and respond.