

**“FOLLOWING THE KING - 62”**

*Matthew 21:1-11*

If Jesus had ever appeared on *The X-Factor*, he'd probably have been saying to the judges' panel at this point, "Well, Simon – it's been quite a journey." The journey that began back in Galilee with Jesus' first prediction to his disciples about what lay in store for him (*16:21*) is now approaching its earth-shattering, world-changing climax. And for many people, who saw in him the embodiment of their hopes and dreams as the Messiah, the anointed and appointed servant of the Lord, this particular episode – so familiar to us as the story of Palm Sunday – would have been the actual climax. Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, riding into Jerusalem to announce his new reign.

But, yet again, our expectations are subverted as Jesus shows us what the Messiah is really all about, and gives more clues as to what this Kingdom will be like. If you read through the books of the Old Testament which tell the stories and record the preaching of the Hebrew prophets – Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and the others – you'll notice that they all use from time to time acted parables. Rather than just stand and preach, they would build little models, wander around naked, rip up clothes, cook odd things – all ways to make their points. And, in some ways, that's what Jesus is doing here. His actions in entering the Holy City in this way give us another insight into his mission and into the new way of living that he has spent the last three years announcing.

And, as we've touched on the Old Testament and the Hebrew prophets there, let me just remind you that once again Matthew is drawing some pretty obvious parallels with all of that in his account of this event. Remember, Matthew is writing this gospel for the first believers who were part of the church he led, believers whose background and faith were Jewish, who were still a little anxious that, by believing in and following Jesus, they might be betraying their faith. Matthew is again at pains to point out that this is all part of the fulfilment of that faith – it's OK to follow Jesus. In fact, it's what their prophets, poets and preachers have been pointing towards all along.

Anyway, here we are on the outskirts of Jerusalem, the City of Peace. And it's Passover time. The city is thronged with people who have come to keep the feast, to celebrate the festival of liberation, the time when they remember the birth of their nation out of the bunch of slaves and immigrants who left Egypt all those centuries before. Around 60AD – three decades after these events – a Roman governor took a census of the animals used in the Passover sacrifices. He reckoned that around 250,000 lambs were slaughtered that year. The regulations about Passover stated that there had to be a minimum of 10 people sharing each lamb, so that meant there would be at least 2.5 million people in and around Jerusalem at this time! Although many of them came from around Palestine, there were also many people there from all over the known world. Some years ago, I was down in the south of France at a resort on the

Mediterranean coast and it was a place where people came and camped and set up their caravans and so on. Talking to a local I discovered that the population of the village – Argelès-sur-Mer – was around 4,000, but during August the population went up to 250,000! That’s the kind of things that was happening in Jerusalem.

And as all those people got together to celebrate their shared national identity, there was obviously a great deal of religious and nationalistic fervour, two things which came together in their heightened expectation of the arrival of the Messiah. It was always believed that the Messiah who was prophesied by the writers and preachers of the Old Testament would reveal himself at Passover time. And those expectations and feelings were particularly fuelled at this time by the presence in the City of Peace of a foreign occupying force – the Romans. Indeed, they weren’t just foreign: they were pagan. Their presence there was not only a sign of the political yoke that the Jewish people were under, but also a constant reminder that their religious practices and cultural sites were being sullied by these ignorant unbelievers. It must have been a little bit disconcerting for the soldiers and officials who were there to keep the peace – a huge crowd of nationalistic Jew who hated them with undisguised fervour, just buzzing with messianic anticipation.

It’s into that ferment of expectation and uneasy hostility, of celebration and ominous nationalism that Jesus rides. He arrives on the outskirts of Jerusalem – the little village of Bethphage, just a couple of miles across the Kidron Valley from the city itself. And he tells his followers that he wants to ride into the city. This has obviously been planned by Jesus. He appears to have walked all the way from Galilee so far – as have most of the pilgrims making the trip – but now he wants a donkey. But it’s not a last minute decision. It’s not as if he’s hailing a taxi. He’s actually booked a minicab! There is a donkey ready for him – an as yet unriden donkey who is brought along with its mother. Matthew seems to stress this fact and links it to a quotation from the book of *Zechariah* – another opportunity to underline Jesus’ Jewish, Messianic pretensions for his first readers.

And, as he rides into the city there are two more little hints that this is all part of the plan to announce himself as the Kingly Messiah. Remember, these crowds are bubbling over with cultural and religious awareness at this time, so Matthew tells us that they put their cloaks down on the road – just as they did when Jehu came to announce his kingship in Jerusalem in *2 Kings 9:13*. And they start ripping branches off the trees to wave like flags, as they did when the leaders of the Maccabees entered Jerusalem to liberate it from the pagan occupiers (recorded in the apocryphal books of *Maccabees*). Those who were in the city, witnessing this figure riding in to such amazing acclaim must surely have thought that all that Messianic stuff was being fulfilled – here comes God’s chosen and anointed liberator who would lead them in the fight to rid the city of the Romans and set up the righteous rule of God: the Kingdom.

Matthew tells us that “*the whole city was stirred*”. That word for “stirred” gives us our English word “seismic”. This was a pretty powerful effect. You may recall it happened once before in Matthew’s Gospel as people came into Jerusalem announcing a new king (2:3). Is he coming to overthrow by force? How will he drive out the hated foreigners? Has he arrived now so that there will be plenty of people to take part in the battle?

Of course not. We know the story too well, don’t we? But they didn’t. They had no idea what was coming. Even the twelve disciples, who had been told so often by Jesus what to expect, still weren’t entirely sure what was going on. But Jesus was. Remember, this is his acted parable. He is riding into the city to establish the Kingdom of God, to bring about God’s righteous rule on earth, to allow heaven to bleed into earth and God’s original plans for creation to be restored. But he isn’t mounted on a war horse, like one of those powerful kings or emperors whose statues now litter Europe – high on a stallion, weapons poised, head held aloft. He doesn’t arrive with a line of raggle-taggle captives roped together behind him. As he arrives at the gate of the City of Peace, he comes on a mission of peace. That’s what the donkey is all about. Jesus is advertising his gentleness and humility. He has come to overthrow the pagans by subversion rather than by force – indeed, it’s more a case of undermining than overthrowing. He has come to change attitudes not modify behaviour. Anyone will do what you want them to if you’re tickling their chin with a spear or holding a sword between their shoulder blades. And once you take it away, they will turn round and do the same to you. Jesus has come to change hearts not draw up military strategies.

He doesn’t need to say anything on this occasion. His behaviour announces it all. He repudiates the use of force. He repudiates the idea of a politically, militarily powerful ruler. The values at the very heart of the Kingdom of God are love, humility, peace, gentleness. You remember? The values all those wonderful hippies were modelling during the anti-war protests of the 1960s – as they threw bricks at policemen and smashed embassy windows. Jesus’ intentions are far more authentic and consistent than all that.

You may recall that last week, when we were talking about humility and servanthood, we said that it wasn’t long after Jesus had left this earth before leaders in the Church of Jesus Christ started to wear fancy clothes and adopt titles and accumulate wealth. Well, the same happens with all this. Christianity was a religion of peace and pacifism in the first couple of centuries. In fact, there are plenty of early writings which make it clear that you couldn’t be a follower of Jesus and a soldier. Then along comes Constantine (amongst many others, but he’s always a convenient whipping boy) and before you know it, there are Christian armies trying to establish the Kingdom of God by force.

The early Middle Ages are full of wars and battles between different factions within Christianity, let alone with the pagans who were, as yet, outside. Along comes Charlemagne and the other Holy Roman Emperors – “Holy”?! – rampaging across Europe and converting people by force (“Get in that river and be baptised or get in that river and stay there!”). Look at the Crusades – and look at their modern counterparts amongst the jihadists. Look at the priests and prelates who acted as apologists for both sides during the First and Second World Wars. Of course, you don’t need to read more than a couple of paragraphs about international relations to realise that it’s all very complicated. There are all sorts of underlying policies and powerplays going on. It’s never simply a black and white, good and evil situation. We use that “Oh it’s all very complex” argument to justify our capitulation to mindless consumerism and unjust economics, so we might as well use it for this as well.

But do you think Jesus might have something to say to all of us today in the light of what he was trying to get over on that first Palm Sunday? As we remember – quite properly and with much gratitude – those who were – are – involved in trying to safeguard what we like think of as our freedoms, shouldn’t we also be thinking very carefully about what Jesus might have to contribute to the argument. Jesus wasn’t coming to liberate by force. He wasn’t coming to establish a triumphant Kingdom by armed might. He came to announce that God was already King – not Caesar, not some Pope on a warhorse, not some bloodthirsty emperor whose activity was given credibility by a couple of tame bishops. God is the one who is to rule in the hearts and minds of men and women. The Kingdom of God is about humility, gentleness, example, influence, subversion. As George Herbert puts it in the hymn we’ll shortly be singing, Jesus was “*King of glory*”, but he was also “*King of peace*”. Jesus wanted attitude change, not regime change.

And that can happen only when his people allow him to start changing their thinking, their worldview, their relationships. William Barclay puts it like this: “*It was not the kingship of the throne which Jesus claimed: it was the kingship of the heart.*” Is Jesus King in your heart? As we shall see in the rest of this chapter, he has come to cleanse, to liberate, to offer a new way of seeing things. And he is the one who offers himself as the one to whom we can give total allegiance – voluntarily, not under duress, not out of fear, but because we see in him the values of the Kingdom and through him experience the amazing love of God the Father. And with the help of his Holy Spirit, we too can reflect those values. (Plenty to discuss in the housegroups this week!)

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He is riding into the city to establish the Kingdom of God, to bring about God's righteous rule on earth, to allow heaven to bleed into earth and God's original plans for creation to be restored. But he isn't mounted on a war horse, like one of those powerful kings or emperors whose statues now litter Europe – high on a stallion, weapons poised, head held aloft. He doesn't arrive with a line of raggle-taggle captives roped together behind him. As he arrives at the gate of the City of Peace, he comes on a mission of peace. That's what the donkey is all about. Jesus is advertising his gentleness and humility. He has come to overthrow the pagans by subversion rather than by force – indeed, it's more a case of undermining than overthrowing. He has come to change attitudes not modify behaviour.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. Jesus is "the Prince of Peace". What do you understand by that?
2. In the early centuries, Christians were expected to be pacifists. Is that still an option for us? Why/why not?
3. How can the Church express God's peace in today's world?

4. People (well, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and their admirers) say that all wars are caused by religion. How do you respond to that?
5. "Jesus wanted attitude change ..." Why do we find that so difficult?