

Fickle or faithful? (Palm Sunday)

Readings: Zechariah 9:9 – 11, Luke 19:28 – 40

Over the last 6 weeks many of us have been involved in Lenten studies. On Thursday evening before we began the study, one group said “I hope you are not going to be so hard on us this week Susan!” So now none of you will ever want to be part of a group I lead!

Actually I don't think it is me who has been hard. The study series is entitled Stewardship and has looked at some very challenging passages from Mark's Gospel. Really the series could have been called Obedience or even possibly Priorities. God's Word is often challenging isn't it; even when bringing comfort.

You may have been able to tell from my newsletter writings that I have been so challenged by the Scriptures we have considered in the Lenten studies. I have been greatly encouraged and stretched also by the group members understandings and experiences. It has been a privilege to be with them for these weeks and I thank them all for their generosity in sharing together.

Today our Bible readings are also extremely challenging. Very often on Palm Sunday we are asked to consider whether we are like the crowd who cheered Jesus on. Will we follow him to the Cross? Or will we turn our backs on him as soon as the good feelings of the parade fade away?

But we probably don't want to be challenged do we – not really? Everything in our world is changing and not all of it is for the good. I at least, would like to stay in my safe comfort zone if I could.

I think I can hear a chuckle from heaven and the words “Well good luck with that!”

If we didn't know the rest of the story, then Palm Sunday is a great day; a triumphant day! Jesus sorts everything out beforehand. He delegates others to find a donkey and everyone co-operates together to make Jesus entry into Jerusalem a great celebration. And it is a great celebration. It's a wonderful parade as the King of Heaven enters the Holy City – the City where Israelites traditionally come for the great festivals.

Imagine it, people paving the way for Jesus by throwing cloaks on the road. They gave him a grand welcome. Then right at the crest of the hill, they break into loud praise. They start singing:

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

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Peace in heaven and glory in the highest

Okay – there is a niggle from the Pharisees but they are always going to niggle. It's in their Job Description. Every good thing Jesus does: niggle him. Have you seen their Job Description? There is a clause which says “Niggle Jesus constantly. Get him to cave in and do it your way.”

But Jesus never does. Jesus always does it God's way. And so he puts them in their place. Jesus sings to them – If mouths are closed, the stones will cry out – 2, 3, 4

Okay Jesus doesn't sing to them but he puts them in their place never the less. In effect Jesus is saying “Hey guys, I am the Lord of all creation. The whole universe will sing my praise.”

Paul would later rephrase that truth in his letter to the Philippian church:
At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow; in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Phil 2:10 – 11

So it is a good story – a story of joy and fun and hope and victory and ...

The trouble is that we know the end of the story don't we.

It is a story of joy and hope and yet – there is pain and suffering before we get to that point. There is a lot of pain and suffering for Jesus. And there is a lot of pain and suffering for Jesus friends> Whether they are faithful to him or whether they are fickle, they will all suffer.

After the wonderful parade, Jesus enters the temple and is reminded of the real truth. This place of worship has been corrupted. And because Jesus sought to bring justice to all of creation, as well as eternal freedom to individuals, a lot of background plotting went on to bring trouble-making Jesus down.

And of course some of the plotting was from those close to him.

But we have the advantage of knowing the whole story. We know the suffering and disappointment but we also know of Jesus' resurrection and of the hope that gives for life here and now as well as for life after death.

Jesus followers didn't know that. The whole circumstance seems to have caught them unawares. It is true they had the benefit of the Scriptures. But God's word isn't always easy to interpret – especially when it comes to prophesy. And maybe they held on to the more positive parts like the passage we read today from Zechariah.

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you,

righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

10 I will take away the chariots from Ephraim

and the warhorses 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[b] to the ends of the earth.

11 As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you,

I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.

So when Jesus comes riding on a donkey, his followers think "Sweet! He is going to rescue us. And he is going to rescue us now."

We know that isn't going to happen the way they expect. And when it all turns to custard not many of them are faithful to him.

Some women are and John, who calls himself the 'disciple whom Jesus loves'. But everyone else deserts him. Because he doesn't act in the way they expected.

I think the challenge from this story is that Jesus so often, doesn't act in the way we expect. He doesn't do things in our lives the way we want them or when we want them. Flipping Jesus – he is so unpredictable! He seems to forget that we want to be in control; not him!

And do we cope with that any better than his followers did back then?

Listen to this poem:

Welcome to the city (but one wee word of advice)

Lord Jesus,
if only you would come to our town like you did to Jerusalem.
We've some great hymns to sing to welcome you!
Our guitars would be out to lead the singing;
we'd wave our scarves and dance.
You would get a real red-carpet welcome –
five star treatment.
There would be a real Christian revival.
It would be wonderful.
If only you would come here
to our country
to rescue us.

But in case you do,
just one we word of advice –
stick to Christianity, but be careful.
Don't interfere with politics, or economics, or big business and all that,
and be careful not to make unpopular changes in the way we worship.

Save us from what might happen in the next life, yes,
but leave us to go on our way,
the way we are used to in this life.

If you get it wrong for our town,
who knows?
We, too, might have to liquidate you.
Ian Cowie, from Eggs and Ashes, Wild Goose Publications

You might think that last line is a bit ridiculous. Of course, we wouldn't liquidate Jesus. Of course we wouldn't have the power to do it and even if we did, we'd be like the faithful disciples.

But maybe there are some ways in which we are more powerful than we think. Maybe we do, in effect, liquidate Jesus. Perhaps in our own fickleness, we deny his power by living in our own strength instead of relying on him. Perhaps we think we can do it on our own.

I am guilty of this myself.

Perhaps we shut Jesus out of our lives. Jesus it's okay for you to speak to me at church or when I'm reading my Bible. But don't interfere in the rest of my life.

Don't tell me not to spend too much money on myself or don't try to tell me how to vote. Don't tell me to get involved in Greenpeace or the Budget Service. Don't tell me to do anything I don't want to do.

The story of Palm Sunday is always tinged with sadness for us because we know the end. We know the same ones who praised Jesus at the top of their voices will soon turn away.

And perhaps we fear we will too.

Confession

O God, you know us well. We are quick to speak of faith, but slow to live it fully. We shout "hosanna" as Jesus approaches, as the people of Jerusalem did many years ago; but we don't want him to come too close -- not close enough to really see...

O God, you know us well. We are quick to claim faith in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour; but, like those who greeted his entry into Jerusalem, we are fickle, slow to live fully as faithful disciples. We know where we fail...

O God, you know us well. We are quick to want the blessings of faithfulness; but, like the Twelve who spent the last week with him, we are slow to accept the suffering of authentic Christ-like living. Forgive our weakness and fear...¹

The really wonderful thing of course is that Jesus does rescue us. He does it through his terrible suffering on the cross. Because of the cross, even when we let him down, even when we act as if he were not Lord and Saviour, we have forgiveness.

And the story doesn't end at the cross does it?

¹ Confession by Rev. Dr. Steven Plymale

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/prayer-of-confession-for-palm-sunday>