**Palm Sunday 2019**

**Luke 19.28-40; 23.32-49**

In this sermon I want to reflect on the events of Palm Sunday and Good Friday and four things Jesus says according to Luke’s gospel and how they demonstrate something about what it means to walk in the way of Jesus.

These are the four sayings:

*‘I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.’*

*‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’*

*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.’*

*‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’*

I wonder if you have ever been on a demonstration.

I’ve been on a few demos in my time: when I was a student in Nottingham in the early 1980s, I was on a Coal not dole march and did a library 24 hour sit in as a protest against the proposed introduction of student loans. Fat lot of good those two demos did. There was also the Jubilee 2000 and drop the debt marches, save the Dursley Training Unit, to name but a few.

At the moment there seems to be marches everywhere but not a solution in sight.

Police helicopters have been busy over Leave and Remain demos in London revealing nervousness about trouble kicking off.

There have been demonstrations in Sudan, Algeria and Libya, not to mention ongoing protest in Venezuela. In Israel a general election saw Netanyahu supporters shout BB, King of Israel’ a very highly charged phrase, echoing back to King David, which reveals their expectation and hope.

Extinction Rebellion makes high profile demonstrations against climate change and the lethargy of governments to do anything about it.

This febrile atmosphere is deeply unsettling and, perhaps, should open us to the crackling tension and heightened danger in Jerusalem as Jesus approached. Our current crises should make us at least sympathetic to the religious authorities who don’t want any trouble: most religious people don’t like signs of trouble, we are by default peace loving people. Yet we should also admire the disciples’ courage and understand how crowds can turn.

Luke’s account of Jesus’ approach to Jerusalem is laced with irony. This is not a victorious king returning to his city, and despite the crowd’s hopes, this is not a Messiah who will lead an uprising against Rome. This is a man on a donkey, who has come to die.

To make the point, Luke leaves out the palm branches – and, unlike the other Gospel writers, he does not show the crowds acclaiming Jesus in the words of Psalm 118.26. *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*

In Luke, it is only Jesus’ disciples who make that connection. In an interesting departure from the original text, they sing, ‘Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord’ (v.38). This links in with the prophecy in Zechariah 9.9, ‘Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.’

This is a king and a kingdom that shatters conventional expectations. Again, we are in the upside-down world of the Magnificat where the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are exalted (Luke 1.52).

Zechariah 9.9-10 paints a different picture of a humble and non-violent journey towards Jerusalem. In this passage, the king will come triumphant to Jerusalem, but to destroy arms and command peace to the nations.

The gospels portray Christ as the revelation of love. He chose the way of non-violence and welcomed all kinds of people into his company and as co-workers. The gospels tell of a Christ whose power was based on an outgoing love, in whom the joy and vitality and self-giving in life was so strong that he had a healing presence. His power was used peacefully for the good of all not for himself. Foolishness to the world where those who are hungry for power try to get to the top to rule over others and make sure they get the best deal, the fattest share of the profits

The symbolism of the cloaks strewn on the road, emblems of identity and resource, put extravagantly at Jesus’ disposal, dramatizing their sense of obedience and devotion to him.

Luke adds a footnote to the story, in which the Pharisees ask Jesus to restrain his disciples. Presumably they feared that the Romans would see this as a revolution in the making and respond by brutally repressing all expressions of the Jewish faith across the board. Jesus dismisses their objections. Even if the disciples fell silent, ‘**the stones would shout out’ (v.40).**

The image comes from Habakkuk 2.11 where the walls of Jerusalem poetically cry out against the injustices and corruption of the city, none of which have been challenged by the leaders of the day.

This is the Pharisees’ final appearance in the Gospel. Inside the city, the Temple authorities, the chief priests and scribes, the Sadducees, those with vested interest in maintaining the status quo of their status and power, they have the final say on matters of faith, and from this point in the story they become Jesus’ main adversaries. Jesus will confront them in the interest of justice. To walk in the way of Jesus is to have an unwavering passion for God’s justice.

It can make us ask what we think is worth demonstrating about and what would command our loyalty enough to devote our whole self and our resources to it.

I have to admit; my own Christian commitment seems rather shabby in the light of this procession. I’ll admit Christianity is my cloak, an identity I own and am glad of, but I have risked little for my faith. It’s also interesting to imagine placards about our most pressing political causes mingled with Jesus’ procession, seeing how dull they can look in his light, or how their resentments are highlighted by his grace, and how our aggressive campaigning is judged by his peaceable journey. His journey was for the sake of others.

Most of our demonstrations are issue-focused, whereas Jesus is displaying a character, a way of living and a way of holding power that subverts our competitive thinking. It is in his person, not in a list of ideas, that peace is rediscovered.

Jesus quoting Habakkuk 2.11 The ***stones of the wall will cry out***, is very provocative as its original context imagined the walls of Jerusalem crying out against corruption *within*. ‘Look into your own hearts and stop blaming the Romans for everything’. While Leave and Remain demonstrations and spokespeople get all the attention at the moment, and the noisy static of Brexit fills the air, we give little air time to the impact of youth service cuts on knife crime. The decimation of legal aid and access to justice for the least well off. We are not attending to the taxation needed for dementia and social care to be properly integrated with health services. We are seeing little debate about transport and in work poverty in this country. Only [the briefest attention](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFkQSGyeCWg) has been given to the profound environmental concerns of the young.

Peaceable, purposeful and provocative, Jesus walks into Jerusalem, walks to his death, walks to confront all the powers that seek to enslave and destroy our humanity. He points to the corruption within each of us. The sin of selfishness, the sin that disregards our creator and our creators’ laws, the sin that seeks to put down the other person, to feel superior. Jesus would die because of our sins, and for our sins. The cross points to the corruption within humanity and the need for justice.

But the cross will also point forwards to a new kingdom where grace prevails, asking us what we would risk everything for, what would we demonstrate for, what would we be prepared to die for?

Luke has Jesus looking down on his crucifiers and saying ‘**father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing’** the soldiers are casting lots for his clothes. The crowd are mocking him ‘he saved others let him save himself’. Jesus gives forgiveness. Following the way of Jesus, is to seek forgiveness and to offer forgiveness – trying to understand another’s actions..

No-one is innocent – apart from the one on the cross. The road to enlightenment and awareness of the love of God starts with a recognition of our own sin and guilt and need for forgiveness. It then flows into a willingness to forgive as we have been forgiven.

On the cross Jesus took on the ideology that violence is the ultimate solution by ‘turning the other cheek’ and refusing to return evil for evil, willingly absorbing its impact within his own body. The cross is not about God’s anger, cruelty, violence and longing for retribution. Instead it’s the opposite. It’s about humanity’s anger, cruelty, violence and longing for retribution. And it’s about God’s dogged love. On the cross Jesus doe not placate God’s anger as he takes the punishment for sin, rather he absorbs the consequences of all the injustice and sin around him.

History records that Jesus died for the self-interest of the Jewish leaders, the pride of the Roman Empire and the detachment and weakness of Pontius Pilate the manipulation of Judas and the fickleness of the ordinary people. the cross demonstrates that Jesus practices what he preaches. He has the courage to take his own medicine. He goes the extra mile. He lays down his life. He refuses to return evil for evil, instead he absorbs that evil in his own body.

In doing so he demonstrates to his contemporaries what a true Messiah or Liberator looks like. Real freedom is not delivered through aggression, it cannot be maintained by force and it is never enjoyed by those who are driven by their anger. Just like peace, it only ever takes root, is nurtured and reaches maturity, in the soli of self-giving love. The only pathway to peace is the way of peace itself. The deepest peace of course is peace with your Creator. God is love; the bible declares. For most people the scales have to drop off their eyes to such a proclamation. They believe that god is non-existent, or God is cruel, or God is angry with them. Jesus staring down from the cross, uttering words of forgiveness to those who commit the worst crime in history – killing the Son of God, says forgive them Father and demonstrates that God is love.

The next saying of Jesus from the cross Luke has it when Jesus replies to the request of one the criminals hanging beside him to remember him when he comes into his kingdom ‘**truly I tell you: today you will be with me in paradise.**

Those who gather around the cross gather in hope that the ultimate evil, the ultimate bad thing to happen – death itself – will not be the last word. We call it Good Friday not because we are perverse – but because of the Good that came out it. Forgiveness, a new start with God, a hope for the future, that death is not the end, but God is in the business of resurrection.

The way of Jesus is never to give up – to hold on to hope, even in the darkest hour, the most excruciating pain, the hardest conflict.

A Scottish missionary who died at Auschwitz after refusing to abandon Jewish children in her care in Budapest will be honored at Hungary’s torchlit March of the Living today, as research reveals she saved many other Jews from certain death by helping them emigrate to Britain.

Jane Haining, who grew up in rural Dumfriesshire, is the only Scot to be honoured as “righteous among the nations” – the term used for non-Jews who risked their lives to protect Jews from extermination – by the Yad Vashem [Holocaust](https://www.theguardian.com/world/holocaust) memorial centre in Jerusalem.

When Haining was arrested by the Gestapo, after Nazi troops entered Budapest in March 1944, she was the only foreigner left working at the mission, having ignored countless orders and entreaties to return home to safety.

She wrote: “If these children need me in days of sunshine, how much more do they need me in days of darkness?”

Two days before her death, Jane had written obsessively to a friend Margit about apples, fresh fruit and bread: she was obviously starving. She wrote pathetically: `Even here on the road to Heaven there is a mountain range to climb.'

The most moving tribute to the Dumfriesshire martyr was written by one of her former wards: `I still feel the tears in my eyes and hear in my ears the siren of the Gestapo motor car. I see the smile on her face while she bade me farewell. I never saw Miss Haining again, and when I went to the Scottish Mission to ask the minister about her, I was told she had died. I did not want to believe it, nor to understand, but a long time later I realized that she had died for me, and for others. The body of Miss Haining is dead, but she is not alone, because her smile, voice and face are still in my heart.'

The Christian claim is that Jesus took on our life and suffered unto death so that we could share in his resurrection, that we could share in that paradise.

In all of life we are in God’s hands. Jesus breathes his last in Luke’s gospel and says, ‘**father into your hands I commit my spirit’.** We are more than a collection of atoms and fascinating electro chemical reactions in the brain. We have spirit. The ultimate reality is not the physical but is the spiritual. God is eternal Spirit. Getting out of our dominant two-dimensional materialistic thinking is vital to commit our spirits into the hands of God. Those who gather round the cross believe there is more to life than meets the eye. Underneath are the everlasting arms.

This week, as we stumble toward Jerusalem, we can rely on God’s grace to carry us every step of the way. On this Palm Sunday, (with or without palms), let’s share in the passion of Jesus for the justice of God in our world – a justice that even the stones will cry out for. As we stand under the cross on Good Friday may we be reminded that we worship a God of love – who offers forgiveness that redeems us and makes us new and opens for us the doors to paradise.

Some material taken from roots on the web:

*David Warbrick is Vicar of All Saints Kings Heath in the Diocese of Birmingham. While likes to think he’s ‘right on,’ he’s never been on a demo, but he might possibly be stirred to action if the price of white Burgundy goes any higher.*