

## ***Palm Sunday Mood-Swings – Sermon for 10 April 2022 (Rev Phil Wootton)***

**Luke 19: 28-40 & Psalm 118: 19-27**

Palm Sunday is a day of mood-swings. **Celebration** is the mood we think of – celebration combined with joy, happiness, thanksgiving, excitement, anticipation – these are moods of the crowds as Jesus entered Jerusalem. Jesus' pilgrim band had made their way from Jericho in the depths of the Jordan Valley, one of the lowest places on the surface of the earth, up and up and up, through the barren desert landscape, until finally cresting the Mount of Olives. That sight of the Jerusalem cityscape makes pilgrim hearts miss a beat. Nowadays it's made distinctive by the golden Dome of the Rock; then it was dominated by the great Temple, its rebuilding near to complete. It's the moment pilgrims have been hoping for and yearning for, imagining it long before they get there.

Jesus enters in style, not on foot but on the back of a donkey. The expectant crowds went wild. Nothing had actually changed on that day. The Roman oppressors remained in power; the collaborating chief priests still controlled the Temple. But still the mood was one of celebration simply because Jesus was there. Do we dare to do likewise? When so much is wrong in the world, with invasion and war-crimes, inflation and climate change apparently demand we live in sorrow, can we still celebrate? Jesus said, 'If the crowds kept quiet, the stones themselves would cry out.' We surely have a right to do the same, simply because Jesus is here.

Scroll down a bit, move the story on, and the mood has indeed changed. **Tears** tell us of Jesus' mood now. Half way down the Mount of Olives, approaching still facing the city, sorrow overwhelms Jesus and his tears flow. 'Jerusalem, if only you knew this day could bring you peace ... but it has been hidden from your eyes.' He foresees that the city that would soon be surrounded by legions and razed to the ground. If only its people had recognised their true King when he arrived; if only they would follow his teaching rather than fighting among themselves and taking on the might of Rome with their own bare hands ... there was the chance for salvation. If only they had accepted this was the day of visitation by their God ... but it was not to be. No wonder his mood was tearful. We read about so much evil in the world today; we feel compassion for so many who suffer. The question is whether we turn those feelings into prayers, and pray those prayers with heartfelt tears – pray for the world that misses out though our God has come among us. Jesus wept over the world. We are right to do the same.

The procession moves on, down into the Kidron Valley, and up through the city gates – the cheers have returned! – past the Antonia Fortress, headquarters of the Roman legion, Pilate's palace next door; and on, left, to the Temple Mount, to the place run by the chief priests. **Anger** is now his mood. Jesus is filled with righteous indignation the goings-on in the Temple. What should be 'a house of prayer' has become a 'den of thieves.' This is not about having a souvenir shop at the back charging high prices. It's the exploitative use of religious practices for the financial gain.

The money-changers made exuberant profits as worshippers had to change their cash into the special temple currency. Then there were those who sold animals for sacrifice. According to one rabbinic source, the price of sacrificial doves was artificially manipulated for profit, inflated so high ordinary people couldn't make their sacrifice and were turned away in shame. It's no wonder Jesus turned over their tables and released their pigeons.

The Temple had become a political and economic powerhouse facilitating the wealth of the few. It had ceased to be a religious space where the voiceless would find a voice. If the Temple, the heart of the nation's identity and the focus of the people's faith, could not be trusted to operate with justice and compassion, then perhaps its time had come. Is it time for us to be angry too at a world so far out of joint? And if we have such righteous indignation, how do we ensure that anger is channelled creatively and not purely destructively? Jesus turned his anger to creative protest, and we may be right to do the same.

It was a day of mood-swings – celebration, tears, anger. But we would be wrong to think it was all spontaneous. There was careful **planning** and preparation behind this day. It was choreographed to be a mix of religious procession and street demonstration – two elements, absolutely inseparable. This was a proclamation of a new king, God's Messiah, coming with a reign of peace and justice.

Jesus, as far as I know, never said directly, 'I am the Messiah,' but on this day he made it plain. All around him, as he entered through the city gates, pilgrims were chanting the psalms that acclaimed the king's coming – Psalm 118: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'

Then there's the donkey – the all-important donkey – lined up in advance to be ready (there's no suggestion of Jesus using miraculous fore-knowledge). This was not just any old animal for Jesus to ride. It was not just a sign of humility compared with Pilate arriving on a warhorse on the other side of town. This is a deliberate evocation of the prophecy in Zechariah 9: 9 – 'See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey.' This is God's King coming to his rightful capital city – a time to celebrate, a time to weep, and a time cry for justice.

As we approach Easter, can we maintain those three moods (whatever our lives may bring us). As the story scrolls on, through Last Supper, prayer in Gethsemane, betrayal, arrest, false trial, beatings, mocking and crucifixion, the mood will continue to change. The question is, where will we be, when our acclaimed King stands before Pilate? Where will we stand when he stretches out his arms on the cross?