

What does the Lord need of you?

Today's gospel reading began with "After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem." (19:28)

If you look back at the first part of Luke 19, you see two distinct episodes – the first is Jesus' encounter with Zaccheus the tax collector - when Jesus responded to Zaccheus the tax collector by having dinner with him, and in turn Zaccheus responded by repenting – declaring that he would no longer cheat, and that he would give half his possessions to the poor, and repaid anyone he had cheated four times over.

The second episode is Jesus telling the parable of the ten minas – where a nobleman gives a minas (and a minas was about 3 months wages) to each of ten servants to put to work. The first two make returns on their investments and are rewarded proportionately, but a third hides the money away and gives it back to the king when he returns – and instead of being rewarded, the minas is taken away from him, and given to the servants who used it best.

Both these stories – the encounter with Zaccheus and the parable of the ten minas are about big changes: Upheavals in the way things should be according to the standards and customs of the time. Zaccheus was a tax collector, a Jew who'd sold out to the Romans – a sinner, and Jesus, and many people thought that a respected teacher shouldn't be dining with a sinner! And in the parable, simply keeping things safe, holding on to what he'd been trusted with, rather than using it, wasn't good enough.

And then we read that Jesus went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. In Luke's gospel, the journey to Jerusalem takes up a lot of the narrative – and Jesus' journey, and his fame reaches its high point on Palm Sunday – or the Triumphal Entry as our translation calls it.

Luke makes a point that that Jesus went on ahead. Jesus wasn't being encouraged by his disciples to go to Jerusalem – in fact, they were probably dreading it; Jerusalem, more than any other place in his travels would be the place where Jesus would clash with the establishment. Jerusalem was the centre of Jewish power and the centre of Jewish religious life. Things were certain to come to a head, and in any conflict with the authorities in Jerusalem, Jesus and his followers would not likely fare to well – and of course, we know how disastrously things turned out.

But greater things were at work than simply the conflict between the established power of the Temple authorities – the scribes and the teachers of the law – and a wandering teacher and his band of disciples:

Jesus went on ahead – Jesus was leading. If we go back to Luke Chapter 9, we read “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” or in other translations that “...Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51) and there is no mistaking that Jesus knew what awaited him there - we read in chapter 13 of Luke’s gospel that Jesus said: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you” (13:34a)

Big things were happening.

“As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples [ahead]” (19:29)

Bethphage and Bethany were villages, but they were also more or less the outer suburbs of Jerusalem.

And the Mount of Olives, where Jesus pauses and sends the two disciples, is only about two kilometres from the Temple.

Jesus tells the two disciples he sends to go to the village and untie a colt that they will find there. Interestingly, Luke doesn’t tell us that it was a colt of a donkey, though both Mark and Matthew do. Jesus tells them that they will find a colt and that they should untie it and bring it to him.

And if anyone asks them why they’re untying the colt, Jesus tells them simply to say ‘The Lord needs it’. Nothing else. Simply ‘the Lord needs it’. (19:31).

And sure enough, the two disciples found a colt tied, just as Jesus told them they would. Which might not be that remarkable, because donkeys were fairly common, and tying them was also fairly common.

But, as we read on, we find that “As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” (19:33)

And they replied, “The Lord needs it.” (19:34)

So the colt, the donkey, was taken by those two disciples back to Jesus and the other disciples at the Mount of Olives.

And there, the disciples threw their cloaks on it, and they put Jesus on it. Jesus didn't climb on, but the disciples put him on it – likely they picked him up bodily, and lifted him onto the donkey. They knew something big, something important, something significant not just in their lives but in the whole of history.

Then Jesus, riding on the colt sets off for the last stretch of the journey. And as Jesus travels, people spread their cloaks on the road. It's a grand parade.

And it's at this point that the other gospels mention the crowd spreading branches along with their cloaks.

As they get closer and closer to Jerusalem, the crowd gets bigger and noisier, and they praise God for all they have witnessed.

As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples – the crowd – began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles they had seen (19:37)

Matthew and John both quote the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 that we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning:

“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.”

But here, Luke gives us only Psalm 118 (Ps118:26)

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” (19:38)

The crowd is clearly identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the one who brings peace. And the peace that he brings isn't simply the absence of conflict, but it's true and complete and lasting peace. Reconciliation between God and all of humanity.

The crowd acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah, acknowledge Jesus as the one who will save them. Hosanna! As the other gospels say.

And just as the crowd of disciples is becoming caught up in the moment, honouring Jesus as the messiah, praising God for all that they've seen Jesus do, the Pharisees are getting worried: This common Galilean teacher is being hailed by the crowd as the messiah. It's blasphemy!

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” (19:39)

And then we have this very strange reply from Jesus – which we pondered at length at bible study last week: “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” (19:40)

This goes back to the preaching of John the Baptist, when he warned the people of Israel had no special place just because they were descendants of Abraham – John said “For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham” (3:8)

The Pharisees – and all those in authority – would also have been worried about the unruly crowd. Jerusalem was packed with visitors for the Passover, and of course the Jewish leadership would be worried about upsetting the Romans.

Jesus doesn't tell the crowd to be quiet. There's no way to stop what is taking place. The entry to Jerusalem is the culmination of the journey that Jesus has been on since he resolutely set out for Jerusalem back in Luke Chapter 9 – or in fact since he began preaching when he came out of the wilderness. What is happening is inevitable.

But although this passage is usually headed the Triumphal Entry, we don't actually get to see Jesus enter Jerusalem – in today's reading we get the parade toward Jerusalem, and in the next section Jesus is already in Jerusalem and is entering the temple.

So, there's no entry... but is there even a triumph? We know that the real triumph of Jesus isn't revealed until Easter Sunday – and we know there was an awful lot that happened between the events of the “triumphal entry” and the resurrection.

I think being part of the church can often be like the Triumphal Entry. People gather together to sing hymns of praise, and hear the scriptures and pray, and they do that as the people of God... and then the service ends, and everyone leaves and returns to being the people of the world, until next Sunday, when the people gather, and the organ plays and all the rest.

Praising God, and praying to God, and listening for God's word shouldn't be something we only do on Sundays, or for that matter, only do in churches. The crowd who cheered Jesus on his way in to Jerusalem, scattered, and turned

their backs on him, even when another crowd, maybe some or even most of the same people, gathered on Friday and cried “Crucify him”.

We’re called, by Jesus, not to be members of a crowd which gathers and disperses as the mood takes us, we’re called by Jesus to be part of his church - the body of Christ. We continue the mission that Jesus gave his church – “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matt 28:19-20a)

And we do that in ways that are different for each of us, and differ for each of us over time. Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12) that “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.”

Paul also wrote to the Romans (Romans 12:6-8) We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

There is no gift without its corresponding service: The owners of the colt gave it to Jesus to use, simply because “The Lord needed it”.

We all need to contemplate what the Lord needs of us. Not because God “needs” our help in order to make his plan for the world – and us – work. God doesn’t rely on any of us, but we all get to be part of the outworking of God’s plan for the world.

What does the Lord need from you? It’s probably not the colt of a donkey. It’s probably not even your car. And there’s a good chance it’s not onerous, it may not be a burden, and it may even be a joyful thing to do. But it’s not something that is done out of duty or obligation: it should be done freely, in response to God’s grace.

What does the Lord need from you? What gifts that you have, can you share with others? And with the church.

Is it serving?

Is it giving?

Is it leading?

Is it encouraging?

Is it upholding others in prayer?

And as a congregation, what does God need from us?

How can we here at St Ives Uniting Church witness to and serve and encourage the community which surrounds it? Looking into the future, what will our congregation's response be to all that God has given us?

In whatever we choose, let's look forward to the day when all people will say:

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Hosanna!

Amen.