

A triumphal entry?

Over the weeks of Lent, we've looked at episodes from Luke's gospel – Keith Garner shared with us on Jesus' temptation in the wilderness when we worshiped with St Andrews South Turramurra, then we moved on to the warning from Herod and the pharisees that Jesus should stay away from Jerusalem, then on to contemplating where God is in the face of human suffering, to one of the most well-known of all the parables, the prodigal son, and then, last week, we moved to John's gospel and saw the extravagant love shown by Mary, as she anointed Jesus the week before Passover.

Jesus' ministry had been building to the point we heard in today's reading from Luke's gospel, the one that's usually headed in our bibles as the 'triumphal entry', covering the events that we know as Palm Sunday. Today's reading is the climax of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, which began back in Luke Chapter 9, where 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): there is no mistaking that Jesus knew what awaited him there - we heard 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)

And now at the beginning of today's reading, Luke tells us that Jesus went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 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.

John records Thomas' response to Jesus' intention to go to Judea – "Let us also go, that we may die with him," he said. (John 11:16).

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 too well.

Greater things were at work, though 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.

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 paused and sent the two disciples ahead, is only about two kilometres from the Temple.

Jesus told the two disciples he sent to go to the village and untie a colt that they would 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. Just '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)

The colt, the donkey, was taken by those two disciples back to Jesus and the other disciples where they waited 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 was happening.

Then Jesus, riding on the colt, set off for the last stretch of the journey. And as Jesus travelled, people spread their cloaks on the road. It was a grand parade.

And it's at this point that the other gospels mention the crowd spreading branches along with their cloaks, which gives us the name 'Palm Sunday'.

As they got closer and closer to Jerusalem, the crowd gets bigger and noisier, and they praised God for all they had witnessed.

As he was 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, "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 (Ps 118:26)

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

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

The crowd was 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 acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, acknowledged Jesus as the one who will save them. Hosanna! (Save us now!) As the other gospels say.

And just as the crowd of disciples was becoming caught up in the moment, honouring Jesus as the Messiah, praising God for all that they'd seen Jesus do, Luke tells us that the Pharisees were getting worried: This common Galilean teacher was being hailed by the crowd as the Messiah. They held it was blasphemy!

We heard that 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: "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 that they had no special place simply because they were descendants of Abraham – John had told the people, "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 busy enough with visitors for the Passover, and of course the Jewish leadership would have been worried about upsetting the Romans.

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

Interestingly, 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. It's a bit of an anticlimax.

So, there was no entry... but was there even a triumph? We know that the real triumph of Jesus wasn't revealed until a week later, on 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 into 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 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 us? As individuals, and as a congregation?

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

We often think of Palm Sunday as the Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but for all the cheering of the crowd and cloaks and branches, it wasn't a triumph in the world's terms. But much of what we see of Jesus as we read the gospels shows us that Jesus doesn't follow the world's terms...

Jesus was riding on a colt of a donkey – but a triumphant saviour would ride on a warhorse or in chariot, surely?

The Holy Spirit descended as a dove, but surely a messiah is deserving of an eagle!

People want a saviour who takes up a sword of justice, but instead Jesus is a saviour who takes up a cross!

People want a roaring, victorious lion, but Jesus becomes a lamb given up for us.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, may not seem triumphant, but it was the fulfilment of prophecy, and it is deeply symbolic. It points to him being the saviour not that we expect or want, but the saviour that we need. The one who laid down his life for us and who, as John the Baptist said, is the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Let's join in the chorus of those who welcome Jesus:

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

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Amen.