

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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Chalmers Memorial Church**

**The text below can also be heard in audio version at
<https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>**

Palm Sunday – The Triumphal Entry (5th April 2020)

Introduction

Hello and thank you for taking time to sit down and read through these worship notes. This is the third such sets of notes that I have produced since our country, and therefore community, went into so called “lockdown”.

The implications of that have been enormous for us all... For me, the notion of lockdown took on a different and unexpected angle this week when my wife came back from walking the dog the other day around the Port Seton Harbour and she noticed, sitting out on the Firth of Forth, which runs alongside our community, at least three stationary cruise ships.

For several days they have just been sitting there doing nothing in particular. On some days they face one way and on others they face the other way. But each time I see them – which I can do through a window at the top of our home – I wonder to myself – “*who on earth is on those ships?*”. I can only assume that the crew on board are also effectively on lockdown too, except that they are doing so on a cruise ship stuck on a large expanse of Scottish Water.

There’s not one of us that isn’t feeling the effects of our lack of mobility – some of us from the warmth of our own homes and some... well, they are still out at sea – literally...

We are learning a bit more about what it means to be on our own... working out our own best solutions as to how we keep together when physical touch is not possible.

Needless to say, the scene that we read of today from Matthew chapter 21 – the Triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem – was not one of lockdown...

In fact, Jerusalem is bursting at the seams – although I have a strange sense that, in the midst of it all, that our central character here – Jesus himself – still felt a little lonely in amongst the crowds that gathered that day.

More of which later...

Before we delve a little deeper, though, shall we first of all pray...?

Let us pray...

Opening prayer and Lord’s Prayer

All glory, laud and honour

To thee, Redeemer King,

To whom the lips of Children

Made sweet Hosannas ring.

Lord Jesus, that day you rode into Jerusalem you heard the sound of crowds. As you approached the city gate you must have sensed just how busy it was beyond that portal into the Holy City of Jerusalem. No doubt you had been there on days like that before but, on this day, you became one of the focal points... sharing a message about yourself and why you had come into our midst.

And so, the crowds shouted Hosanna... Hosanna in the highest!

And they waved Palm branches...

They even threw their cloaks on the ground...

On that day the sweet Hosanna's rung out clearly.

As we look at that journey today, we do so from the perspective of what we now know was soon to happen and such knowledge brings a new and deeper dimension to our love for you.

Thank you, Jesus that you made that journey for us...

Thank you, Jesus that you stuck your neck out in the crowd to declare your purpose.

As we worship you this day, we confess that we do not always live worthily of the one who made that journey for us.

We would have perhaps chosen a slightly less obvious path... entered the city more gently - meaning that no one would have even known that we were there at all.

We might have demurred or dissimulated pondering whether, on balance, the journey was worth taking... the risk seemingly too great...

Lord Jesus, we thank you that on this day – Palm Sunday – that you teach us that some journeys are worth making and that making some noise along the way is not always such a bad thing.

Bless our time of worship today as we wave our proverbial branches and shout our own personal Hosannas to Jesus – our King.

Hear us now as we bring these our prayers to you in the words which Jesus has asked to pray saying:

Our Father

Who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts

as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Bible Reading – Matthew chapter 21 verses 1 to 11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethpage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, 'Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.'

4 This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet:

5 'Say to Daughter Zion,

*"See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,*

and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’

‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’

‘Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, ‘Who is this?’

11 The crowds answered, ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.’

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

A Reflection

There are times when I think I’m the only one to think an idea only to discover that someone else has got there before me... All the while you proudly imagine that you’ve thought some great thought or made some great discovery... asserted some unique point.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, however, pretty much had it right - *“There is nothing new under the sun”* (Ecclesiastes chapter 1 verse 9).

And so it was when I read the passage for today – the triumphal entry into Jerusalem taken from Matthew chapter 21 – when, somehow, all I could think of was the fact that had Jesus sought to ride into Jerusalem today, or indeed, almost anywhere in the world at the moment, that it wouldn’t have been possible for him to do so in April 2020.

However, as I soon discovered, that same point had already been stated by the American preacher Karoline Lewis when, in an article she recently wrote about this passage, she begins with these words:

“The parades have been cancelled. Maybe some postponed. The palms have been placed in a corner or a closet — what to do with them now? And Holy Week?”
(<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5424>)

Even before the Prime Minister, and then the First Minister, announced the countrywide lockdown most of the parades had already been cancelled anyway.

Our own local Gala in Port Seton had been abandoned for the year. It had to be. There was no choice.

Football matches across the land had been postponed too. Large outdoor events were all shut down.

The risks of infection were – and are – simply too high. And, even now, events not due to take place for several months are being postponed or cancelled – first the Olympic games in Japan and now, more locally, the Edinburgh Festivals.

The effects of Covid 19 will be felt long after the virus has been taken under control.

And anyway, it is harder to plan for how we can get things going again when, at the same time, we do not really know when the ending of what is causing all the cancelling is going to be?

The net effect, alongside this, is that it has added – for Christians - an extra dimension to the Season of Lent through which we have been journeying in recent weeks... an added poignancy and significance as we ponder the journey of Jesus towards the cross.

Karoline Lewis again hits the nail on the head when she goes on to quote a saying that has been circulating recently on Social Media sites to the effect that, *“This is the Lentiest Lent I have ever Lented and this may be the Holiest Holy Week we have ever Holied”*

That just about says it all, folks.

Most of the time we have journeyed through Lent we have done so at a sort of theoretical distance. We’ve perhaps pondered the Lenten themes of Temptation and building up our spiritual resilience, but have done so at a time when we’ve been able to get out and about as normal... meet the people we usually share our time with...

In every meaningful sense, in the past we’ve been able to share the experience with our fellow travellers in faith...

But this year, we had to think about these sorts of issues – the challenging issues of faith – from a more personal perspective.

When Jesus speaks about his forthcoming death on a cross and lays down the challenge to take up our own crosses, we’ve sort of understood exactly what he means. And that has made Lent this year a good bit *“Lentier”* than previous years.

Whatever these recent weeks have been like however, the Christian Calendar has its own way of keeping going. Even when the world seems to be moving more slowly - and we are more aware of the sound of silence around us – the Christian year just seems to keep moving relentlessly onwards.

We’ve been through the five Sundays of Lent and here we are, just as our Lenten observances come to an end, at the events of Palm Sunday – the day when Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem in the week that he would end up on the cross.

In every meaningful sense, the arrival at Palm Sunday feels like a spiritual *“hand brake turn”*.

After thinking about scriptural passages that take us to the harder challenges of the Christian faith, we now find ourselves in an almost jubilant mood.

After all the hard work, we now find ourselves with a little bit of light relief.

For once, everything seems to be going well for Jesus – on the surface, at least.

Jesus engages in the sort of procession that – for just a moment – might even make us forget about where all of this is leading.

Play your cards right... omit certain key parts of the story altogether – such as the arrest of Jesus and the events of Good Friday – and you might even just be able to seamlessly connect the seeming joy of Palm Sunday and the overwhelming celebration of Easter Day...

In doing that we could, if we really wanted, join the company of the American spiritual writer, Anne Lamott, who even thinks for some of us – including herself - that this might seem much easier to digest and deal with.

Here’s how she puts it – *“I don’t have the right personality (she writes) for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision (she continues) of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny sitting outside the tomb - everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates! Now you’re talking!”* (<https://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2005/032005.html>)

And yet, even Lamott admits that such a truncated and shortened version of the gospel simply wouldn’t do.

It could never do.

After all, as we did in last week's reflection, we need to ask ourselves what exactly is the Bible writer trying to get across to us here?

What is the significance of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem?

Is it there solely to provide a slightly easier to digest story in what has been a fairly challenging few weeks?

Is it there to serve the purpose of bringing a smile to our faces so that we can sing the words we heard earlier on – *"All glory Laud and Honour to thee redeemer King"* ...

Or to allow us to enjoy the thought of Palm branches being waved?

Or, is it rather, the day when Jesus does something that is, in all reality, amongst the most radical and challenging of things that he has ever done and will ever do... the day he steps forward and says, *"Here I am... I have come to fulfil my purpose... the purpose for which I have been sent..."*

To do so whilst Jerusalem is literally bulging at the seams – no social distancing here – during the single biggest religious festival of the year, is Jesus' way of bringing powerfully home that he is ready for what will happen to him.

After all, what was the central events of the Passover festival?

It was, of course, the sharing of the Passover meal and, in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, that meant the slaughtering of thousands of lambs which would then form the central part of that special meal – just as it had been when the Israelites had shared in one last gasp meal in Egypt before a reluctant Pharaoh sets them free.

Jesus – God's perfect lamb – has come to offer himself...

We rightly pause for a moment at the very thought... It is simply awesome... beyond comprehension...

Not only does Jesus not expect there to be a well executed plan to rescue him, but he also willingly goes into the very place where he knows what his fate will be.

He is no secret agent... no James Bond type character... no master of disguise who gets by simply by knowing that someone, somewhere, is sitting with the fast car outside that will whisk him to freedom.

No – there are no getaway cars... not even a getaway horse... or even a getaway donkey... the mind boggles at the very thought!

Once he is there, he is there to stay – ready to face whatever will come his way.

Which is why I suggested in my opening thoughts today, that whilst Jesus was surrounded by so much noise and shouting... that whilst they threw palm branches and cloaks at his feet that something of this image of a man surrounded by people only serves to emphasis the essential loneliness of Jesus' journey too.

This is a Saviour of the World sized journey...

A journey for Jesus to take alone...

It is better, therefore, not to try and skip from Palm Sunday all the way to Easter day... however tempting and easier to digest that would be.

The parts in between matter too...

They are the reason why Jesus is there at all...

And why he is our Saviour and Lord.

Let us pray

Closing prayer

Ride on, ride on in majesty!

In lowly pomp ride on to die.

O Christ thy triumphs now begin

O'er captive death and conquered sin.

Loving God, on this special day – as our Lenten journey heads on into Holy Week – we thank you that Jesus was willing to make that journey for us, a journey into a busy city where he would come face to face with those who, for such a long time, had tried to destroy his ministry.

In that city – surrounded by noise and bustle – Jesus enters and offers himself as the Lamb of God, your precious Son.

What can we say this day, loving and living God, but to express our devotion to you...?

For all we are in awe at what Jesus did we are, however, still acutely aware of the loneliness he must have felt even in the heart of the crowd.

We pray this day for those who feel lonely... for those whom the days are long and who are finding it hard to fill their time.

We pray for those who feel isolated at home and who are seeing out these days with the support of a phone call or the delivery of a food parcel.

We thank you for the many who have taken up the cause of finding ways to care for others at this time. We pray for those who make up food parcels and those who deliver them.

We pray for local shop keepers finding different ways to deliver food to people and who provide a chance for someone to chat, even if only for just a few moments.

We pray for those who pick up phones and send cards and texts and emails as they seek to minimise the effects of loneliness.

And we pray, as we do each week and each day at this time, for those who offer care to us at times like these – for NHS workers and other emergency staff whose job is simply unenviable at this time and yet which is so vitally important.

Before we end our prayer at this time let us spend just a moment remembering those for whom these days have brought huge changes to their lives – who are currently unwell or who have faced loss.

Lord, the message of Palm Sunday tells us of a Saviour whose compassion overflowed beyond anything else and anyone else.

May that compassion be felt this day and every day as we bring these our prayers in Jesus name...

Blessing

And now may the Blessing of Almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with you throughout this journey of Holy Week. May God inspire you to greater faithfulness and faith and may, as you walk his way, his presence bring the comfort, strength and the peace you need this day and indeed every day, Amen.