

Palm Sunday – Luke 19: 28ff and Phil 2: 5-11

Walking calmly towards your death can never be an easy thing to do. I wonder how Jesus felt when he looked up at Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday. The procession that we've already taken part in probably doesn't really capture the way that Jesus himself was thinking. This passage is a vital story in the life and ministry of Jesus as he enters the city of Jerusalem for the death that he knows awaits him.

It's a story that's full of irony when Luke tells it. The power and majesty of Jesus – his royal kingship – is being recognised only by a band of his followers and a few Pharisees who are looking on with disapproval. The King of Kings, arriving in the holy city, not in a gold leafed coach or an early Roman version of Air Force One, but sat on the back of a smelly old donkey.

The key to our understanding of this passage is found in our earlier New Testament reading from Philippians 2: 5. This passage contains the very heart of Paul's theology about who Jesus is. In fact, it arguably contains the very heart of all that Bible says about Jesus. Let's turn to it now on page 1115, as we discover what was really going on that morning.

At the time of writing this passage, about AD61, Paul was imprisoned in Rome. He couldn't visit his church congregation in Philippi and wanted

to encourage and challenge them to live godly lives – something that we all need to be constantly reminded of.

But Paul wisely realised that just because people know what they should do, it doesn't always mean that they'll do it! Our human nature keeps us living for ourselves rather than fully for God.

An Example to Follow:

Paul knows this is normal, so he gives us a practical example to follow – the example of Jesus...someone who definitely didn't live for himself.

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” Phil 2:5-11 (NIV).

The essence of Paul's message is: Jesus, though he had all riches and power, made himself poor for us, his church. Everything Jesus did for our salvation was the very opposite of the selfish ambition that we're all often tempted to try to display. The reason why the President of the United States flies around in Air Force 1 and why our own Royal Family travel in a gold horse drawn carriage is because they want to impress. They want to demonstrate to all who see them how rich they are and how powerful the empire that they control is. Trim away the obvious excess and we're often pretty much the same. One of the reasons why

we want a certain brand of car or to live on a particular street is that we want to show people that we're important and we've made it in life.

Instead of trying to set ourselves above other people, as Christians we're called to be servants of each other – whether we like it or not – and Jesus is the best possible example of a servant we can follow. Let's see why.

We read in V5-7 – Jesus, though divine and above all things, didn't try to hold onto his divinity. He didn't exploit his power or riches or try and keep hold of them in case he found himself in a tight corner here on earth.

He gave it all up and became a servant through his birth as a human being – a slave to his Father's will and the physical factors that affect all humans. Things like illness and hunger and pain.

What this means, is that in terms of his humanity, Jesus was the same as us, and therefore knows what it's like to suffer as a human being. He would have worried about his ageing parents, just like us and have known the stress of having too many demands placed on his time like we often do.

However, he was different to us in the sense that he never stopped being equal with God. Because of this, God really knows what it's like when we suffer, and he can empathise with us totally.

In V8 Jesus shows just how far God was willing to go to serve us so that we can have relationship with him. Jesus demonstrated the ultimate act of humility by humbling himself to death – a slave's death, painful and degrading on a cross. On Palm Sunday, Jesus knew exactly what he was letting himself in for. As he entered Jerusalem he knew that he walked towards his death.

Humility is what Paul is trying to inspire in his readers. Being prepared to give up comfort and security to care for one-another.

- To put ourselves out for the sake of others.

This is what Christian discipleship is. Living wholeheartedly for God and serving each other, inspired by the fact that God was prepared to do it first.

The idea of living like this might be filling you with fear or with anger. Doesn't the Jesus way of life suggest a life of weakness? I don't think so...Humility isn't the same as weakness, it's a sign of strength! Jesus humbled himself by resisting the temptation to follow an easier calling of conformity to the world around him. If he'd embraced wealth and comfort like other people around him he would have been denying his authentic self – which he knew meant that he would live differently and set a different sort of example.

I can understand why we might feel confused or fearful at the thought of a life like this. What might happen if we live in this counter-cultural way? Well let's see what happened to Jesus?

We read in V9-11 that because of Jesus' humility, God's exalted him – lifted him up to be praised by all. One day every knee will bow before Jesus in worship, adoration and, perhaps for some, in fear. Those who have followed the example of Jesus will be honoured and we're told that Jesus himself will stand before us and wipe all sadness away from our lives.

So how should we respond to Paul's theology today? How can we live in humility as Christians sharing in the ministry of Jesus?

Globally – we can share in the suffering of the world in many ways – through prayer, by petitioning those in power for justice, through our own sacrificial giving... Shirley told us last week about her work with Compassion and the plight of homelessness, hunger and disease that millions of families face daily throughout the world. We need to find ways of serving these nameless people, perhaps by sponsoring a child.

Locally – we can refuse to allow division between ourselves and the other people who live in our villages. Do we truly care about them or are we trying to erect self-protective walls of independence which cut us off from our neighbours?

Ultimately – it begins here, in our own hearts. This is where the root of evil that affects other people comes from. Are we jealous of other people in our church? Are we bitter or angry? Do we share gossip with others? If so, we need to change and more importantly we CAN change. We can change because Jesus has given us an example to

follow and gives us the power through his Holy Spirit to do something about it.

Is there someone sat in this room that you haven't spoken to for a long time because of some argument or division in the past? Are there people you try and avoid when drinking coffee after the service? These are the kind of divisions that God needs us to sort out amongst ourselves.

Paul knows that God is gentle in his dealings with us but that ultimately he's our judge as well as our redeemer. Luke also draws on this judgement at the end of his account of Palm Sunday. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem and the first thing he does is to weep. He weeps over its coming destruction – ruin that came because the people refused to recognise Jesus' kingship over their lives. Let's make sure that we're not guilty of the same blindness or hardness of heart that leads eventually to our spiritual ruin. Instead, let's resolve to follow Jesus' example of humility and allow ourselves to be embraced by God's loving kindness this Easter.

Let's pray.

“Lord, who came down from Heaven to earth for love of the human race;
From so high to so low;
From such high dominion, to such low poverty;
From such high magnificence, to such low affliction;

From such high happiness, to such low sorrow;
From such a pleasurable life, to such a painful death;
Now Lord, for all that love which you revealed to us, in your incarnation
and in your passion;
We implore you for mercy and help.”¹
To live and worship together in unity without selfish ambition or conceit.
With humility regarding others as better than ourselves. Looking not to
our own interests but to the interests of others. And to have the
mindset of Christ.
In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

¹ Rolle – Meditations on the Passion.