

Palm Sunday message, March 20, 2016, [slide 2a] title, “Celebrating on a Sad Day”, [2b] text, **John 19:20-44** (read the text) [2c]

I wasn't intending to break my sermon series for Easter this year, being under a certain urgency to work through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. But as it turns out, and through no planning of mine, Palm Sunday comes after the last message for Ezra and the first for Nehemiah. So could this be taken as a sign? That is how I have taken it, for better or for worse!

Some while ago when the choir began working on the music for Easter our choir director asked me [slide 3a] how Christians are supposed to regard Palm Sunday: do we celebrate or not? It is a good question, a question which arises directly out of the facts of the event itself. [3b]

What was [slide 4a] the event? Jesus rides a donkey into the city of Jerusalem to wild shouts of affirmation. At the time, the city was full to overflowing with people, most of them Jewish pilgrims from all over the Roman empire and even beyond. They were there to celebrate the Passover Feast. Passover was/is arguably the most significant and defining celebration of the Jewish people, for it was/is the ritual remembrance of the Exodus of Israel as an enslaved nation from Egypt, the beginning of 40 years of wandering in the desert wilderness of Sinai during which God gave them the law through the great Law giver, Moses. It was the Law which gave formal structure to the Jews as the covenant people of God, a nation of God's own choosing and bearing the imprint of both God's grace and righteousness. Liberation from Egypt meant liberation from the power of Egypt's gods as well as from the power of the state.

God performed ten miracles to persuade the king of Egypt, Pharaoh, to let the Jews go, many of which were directly aimed at the pretended power of her gods. The last of these was the death of the first born son in every family in Egypt. More precisely, [4b] those who died were the first born sons of every family in Egypt who neglected to slaughter a lamb and put some of the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintel of their house.

Now that is an interesting fact to reflect on. Slaughtering the lamb and putting the blood on the doorposts and lintel was [4c] an act of faith. And as an act of faith it transcends the bloodlines of the Jewish families. [4d and slide 5a] If an Egyptian family acted in faith and put the blood on the doorposts and lintel, the angel would pass over their house. [5b] If a Jewish family did not, too bad. Admittedly the assumption of the narrative Moses writes in Exodus 12 is that all the Jews did as they were told. I sure hope so, especially after the nine other miracles building up to this final and most dramatic of them all!

So when Jesus enters the city on a donkey, Jerusalem was full of Jews from all over the place who had gathered to celebrate the Passover. Some of these were probably very devout; others were probably not, and there was likely every shade of faith between. [5c]

Included in the crowd were those who were following Jesus. If you read the Gospels with care you realize that Jesus' ministry has had both a rise and a fall in popularity. It had become extremely [slide 6a] popular when Jesus performed lots of miracles, especially when He miraculously multiplied a handful of loaves of bread and a couple of fish to be enough to feed a multitude. But as recorded in John's Gospel, [6b] at a certain moment Jesus took the crowd to task for failing to pay attention to what He was teaching them about [6c-f] God, the kingdom of God, and the judgment of God, and what God was accomplishing through Jesus Himself as the special agent of God's truth and grace for Israel. The result was that practically everyone except the twelve disciples Jesus had personally selected along with a certain following of women left Him [6g] (John 6:68-69), *"After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the Twelve, 'Do you want to go away as well? Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.'"* [6h]

But then, only a few days before Jesus rides the donkey into Jerusalem [slide 7a], he raised a man from the dead in the little village of Bethany not more than two miles from Jerusalem. That was guaranteed to capture people's attention, and there is plenty of evidence that [7b] Jesus intended that it would. We are told that lots of people came from Jerusalem to commiserate with the man's family, and many of them were on the scene when Jesus raised the man from the dead. This was not the first person Jesus raised from the dead, but it was certainly the most dramatic of those times, and we can readily believe [7c] rumor of the deed would largely wipe away for most the second thoughts of most regarding their enthusiasm for the potential in this remarkable prophet. [7d]

So if we have been paying attention to the gospel accounts leading up to the triumphal entry by Jesus into Jerusalem, which is the big event for Palm Sunday, we realize the picture we have of the [slide 8a] Jews' thoughts regarding Jesus is anything but clear. [8b-d] What do they believe? What do they look for from God? What are their hopes? And in this I think they are like many today, who really do not know what they think of God or what they hope from God. [8e]

If you know the Bible and the record of God's promises to the Jews and the prophecies given regarding the Greater Son of David who was to come, you know that Jesus' selection of a donkey and the colt of a donkey was no arbitrary action. He [slide 9a] was carefully fulfilling the prophecy given in Zechariah 9:9, *"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of*

Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” [9b] The Jews were bound to notice, and they did. But what was on Jesus’ mind, what was He thinking and expecting? The action was clearly provocative; but [9c] what was Jesus intending to provoke in the hearts and minds of the Jews? [9d]

Even if Jesus had told His disciples we cannot know for sure as Luke doesn’t tell us. But Luke does record some things Jesus said which offer some insight as to what was on His mind. As he approached Jerusalem, coming from Jericho, he told [slide 10a] the parable of the ten minas. In that parable Jesus refers to a nobleman who travels to a far country to receive the kingship, (Luke 19:11-27).

“As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. He said therefore, ‘A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself and a kingdom and then return. Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, ‘Engage in business until I come.’ But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying “We do not want this man to reign over us.” When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him., that he might know what they had gained by doing business. The first came before him, saying, “Lord, your mina has made ten minas more.” And he said to him, “Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall authority over ten cities.” and the second came, saying, “Lord, your mina has made five minas,’ And he said to him, “And you are to be over five cities.” then another came, saying, “Lord, here is your mina, which I kept laid away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are a severe man. You take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.” He said to him, “I will condemn you with your own words, you wicked servant! You knew that I was a severe man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money in the bank, and at my coming I might have collected it with interest? And he said to those who stood by, “Take the mina from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas.” And they said to him, “Lord, he has ten minas!” I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me.”

The nobleman leaves [10b] two realities behind him: 1) he entrusted some of his wealth – the ten minas/servant – to his [10c] servants whom he challenged to be good stewards, and 2) the [10d] generality of his citizens who hated him and tried to sabotage the nobleman’s quest. [10e] The [slide 11a] parable closes with [11b] two of the servants being commended for good service, and one of them condemned for faithlessness, while the nobleman, who returns as king, calls for the

[I1b] execution of all those who had opposed his becoming the king. [I1c] The parable is grim. The truth of it was on Jesus' mind as he approached the ancient city where David had been king and Jesus was to be king in the coming age. Jesus knew He was hated by many, especially amongst the powerful, and He also knew those who presented themselves as His servants were not necessarily trustworthy. But [I1d] Jesus went forward anyway, riding the donkey into the city where He would be betrayed and crucified. This is love's triumph. [I1e] Did Jesus know that 70 years later the Romans would destroy Jerusalem and kill nearly all her citizens? Yes, He knew, for He prophesied that exact event.

During the triumphal procession itself, Luke records a brief encounter between Jesus and some Pharisees who were standing along the route [slide I2a] (Luke 19:38-40). Hearing the crowd shouting out, *"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"* the Pharisees say to Jesus, *"Teacher, rebuke your disciples."* Jesus replied, *"I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."* Now this is worth some thinking. On the surface it is clear [I2b] Jesus is affirming the excitement of the crowd. There is something here to celebrate. But the affirmation goes considerably [I2c and slide I3a] deeper than the excitement of the crowd. They were excited for the coming of the long awaited Messiah. That was good even if they were full of false expectations. But there is much more to see here. In his letter to the [I3b] **Romans (8:18-22)**, Paul writes, *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."* Suddenly we see something much more than a reference to inanimate things in Jesus' reference to the stones! Jesus knows what so many forget, that the whole of creation has been profoundly affected by the fall of humanity into sin, and that the whole of creation waits with eager anticipation for the end of this age and the advent of the age to come when God will put all things right and life will finally triumph over death in all its aspects. In the Psalms and the prophets at times we read of trees and mountains singing and dancing and clapping their hands in joyful praise. Whether or not the Pharisees noticed, [I3c] Jesus' words point to the profound truth that [I3d] He is the coming King who will heal the world. [I3e] Surely if the stones are prepared to celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem we should be ready to celebrate as well. [I3f]

Another statement by Jesus during the procession into the city is recorded by [slide I4a] **Luke (19:41-44)**, *"And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you*

and surround you and hem you in on every side, and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.” We do not live in Jerusalem and so it is unlikely that we feel the full force of these words. They are terrible words. Further, these words were fulfilled just 70 years later when the Roman legions came and totally destroyed the city of Jerusalem, temple and all. This, too, was on Jesus’ mind: He knew from the beginning what the outcome would be; [I4b] Jesus knew from the beginning that the crowds would turn on Him and His own disciples would desert Him. But [I4c] this did not deter Him, nor did it rob him of the prospect of incalculable joy which lay beyond the day of suffering which was immediately before Him – (Hebrews 12:1b-2), “...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” [I4d and I5a] Jesus wept for the sins and sorrows of the people He came to save. He wept because they would choose not to be saved. But those [I5b] tears did not silence the deeper song of joy in His heart which celebrated the triumph of God’s grace over the ugly stain of sin and the bitter consequence of death. So [I5c and slide I6a] we, too, should celebrate on this day, for we too know of the triumph of life over death, of God’s grace over our sin, of the love of God which will set all things right at the end of the age when Jesus comes as King upon the throne of David.