

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS – THE CROWD

20th March 2016

Luke 19:29-46
Philippians 2:5-11

Have you ever heard reports of a peaceful demonstration which later turned violent? Maybe you have been in one. There is nothing wrong with turning out to demonstrate for what is right, indeed, not to do so would be the wrong. But people who plan peaceful demonstrations, on almost any subject, have to be aware that there might be those around who would like to turn their event into something else. There are people for whom peaceable-ness is not important, people whose cause is not even the same as the one the planned event is designed to highlight, but who are willing to hijack any event to try to make their point known, one way or another. And there are those who just want to cause mischief.

Jesus planned a peaceful, a religious, procession into Jerusalem. He sent for a donkey, because that meant something. It would remind people that the prophet Zechariah had said *Rejoice Greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem, Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* (Zech 9:9) Jesus chose to come into the city in this way, to make an entrance, but a low-key entrance, so that people would remember that their king was to be humble, not just victorious.

And it went well, it went fine. The disciples remembered the prophecy and did what it said – they rejoiced and shouted aloud. But then noise, the emotion, the shouting spread. It ceased to be a religious procession and it became a demo. It was the unplanned, raucous, emotional outburst, by the people of Jerusalem and many pilgrims there for the Passover, of their desire for a king. They wanted and expected a freedom fighter, a warrior, who would lead them in an uprising against the detested Roman occupation. They had always assumed the Messiah would be a soldier, like Joshua, or David or a Judas Maccabaeus, two centuries before, or even a Gideon of the past. You see, they had models of what they expected would happen. It had happened before: freedom fighters had thrown off foreign, oppressing armies. There was a pattern of this kind of thing and they were excited that they were going to see the pattern again in their day.

We can imagine then the crowd's disappointment and disenchantment when, instead of proceeding to the Governor's House to tell Pilate his time was up, Jesus went to their Temple, their most sacred place, and told his own people to get out! In the words of a lesser known song by Sydney Carter *'We looked for a leader to free us from Rome, we thought we could rule much better at home; so we welcomed the Saviour with noises and din, but we didn't much want him to free us from sin.'* Jesus was not adhering to their expectations, and it turned out he couldn't be manipulated. All the shouting and cheering and hailing him as King could not make him act in the way that the people

wanted. Even the leaders could not get him to stop people shouting, and no one was going to make Jesus do anything other than what he knew he had to do.

And so he went to the temple, to the heart of the nation. Through his actions, Jesus was saying, don't blame the government, the occupying army, the injustice of our politics for our problems: the faults lie within.

It's always easier to point the finger, to find a scapegoat, to blame someone else, than to accept responsibility for ourselves. It is always easier to see the speck of dust in my brother's eye than the beam of wood in my own. We can begin to see how by Friday the crowds could be manipulated to call for Jesus' crucifixion, and why they asked for Barabbas to be released: he was a real freedom fighter, a real terrorist. Easier to reject the person who asks you to do the hard thing, to turn your back on the one who will not fit in with your plans and patterns.

All of us want to find a scapegoat for whatever goes wrong in our lives and for the things that we do wrong. It can't be our fault – whatever it is! It is a lot easier to blame someone else, or to blame outside forces than to take any sort of responsibility. You see it in children, from the very youngest age, who will always tell you it wasn't their fault, whatever "it" is – sometimes before they even know what it is for which they might be blamed! It wasnae me! To look for a scapegoat is a childish trait that many of us never really grow out of. But Jesus does not let us do this. Jesus expects us to grow up and look at what is really going on, within us as individuals, within us as a society. He expects us to look and not seek a scapegoat, but to look with the question "How can I put things right, where can I change?"

Jesus came into Jerusalem on a donkey, a young foal. His legs would have dangled, probably almost to the ground. He wasn't trying to cut an impressive figure, but to show his humility as he came to fulfil prophecy. And it is to follow in his humble way, his humble mind-set that we are called. St. Paul shows us this when he tells us to have the same mind in us, the same way of thinking about ourselves that was found in Jesus. And then he quotes that ancient Christian hymn, which says that (sing) *"He became like a man, he appeared in human likeness, he was humble, and walked the path of obedience, to death, his death on the cross. For this reason, God raised him to the highest place above and gave him the name that is greater than any other name; so that in honour of the name of Jesus all those in heaven and on the earth and in the world below will fall on their knees and all will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Lord."*

The praises and acclamation which are acceptable to Jesus are those which come from humble hearts, the hearts of those who know what they mean when they say that Jesus is Lord. The hearts of those who know that to say he is Lord means to put ourselves at his disposal, to allow him to work in his way, not to try to force him to work in ours, not to try to use Jesus to get our own way in this world.

Bowing the knee, and saying Jesus is Lord means more than lip or knee service. Anyone can go through the motions. To some extent, all of us do. But bowing the knee and saying that Jesus is Lord means putting someone other than ourselves at the centre of our lives. It means that we no longer think about ourselves all the time, what we want, what would please us. Instead we ask God to help us look at our lives and the way we interact with the wider world from his point of view – what will help others, what

is the thing to do that shows love and compassion? It means living our lives in unity with God

The bright sunshine at the beginning of this week turned my mind to spring cleaning. There are so many little corners in a house which you don't notice and can comfortably ignore until the sun shines right into them and shows you the dust and grime residing there. And when that happens, I for one look forward to getting them cleaned. I even cleaned the cat flap this week – I hope the cats appreciate that! A few weeks ago we read that our bodies are temples for the Holy Spirit. Temples – that means places where God lives and where God is worshipped. In all that we do with our bodies, God is present, God can be worshipped. And sometimes when we come in humility before God it is like the sun shining into the corners, and we have to allow him to do what Jesus did and drive out from the temples of our bodies, the temples of our lives, the things which should not be there, which are distracting us from loving God, the things which are taking up space (which very often means time) which could and should be better used to glorify him.

Having the temples of our lives cleansed is not simply a moralistic spring clean, though. It is all about forgiveness. It is about allowing God to forgive us our wrongs and letting him take from us the hurt and harm that our wrong can still do to us – both the wrongs that we do and the wrongs that are or have been done to us. When we hang on to our pain, our bitterness, our grudges; when we hang on to the guilt we feel over who we have been and what we have done, we are not making room in our lives, room in God's temple for him to take up residence. All of this is involved in bowing the knee and saying that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And it is such a joy! To forget about our poor selves, to see our poor selves as loved by our Lord and maker, what a joy is there! The people welcomed Jesus into the city with shouts of joy and praises, because they thought that they knew what he was about and what he would do. We are fortunate enough to know that what Jesus was about then, as now, was not about politics and systems, but about healing and wholeness – for the world, but beginning with individuals, one at a time. That is how he will rule the world, and that is how he rules our lives, with the joy of his love and the healing of his forgiveness. May we take that joy with us into this Holy Week, when we walk with Jesus on the way of the cross. Amen.

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