

Great Expectations

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 April 2025

Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

[0 : 00] Why don't we pray. Gracious Lord, thank you very much indeed for your word and thank you that the Lord Jesus taught that your word is truth and that your truth can set people like us free and so we ask now Father that you would fill our hearts afresh with your Holy Spirit.

That we might discern your truth and your truth would free us to be the people you call us to be in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So I have two major challenges before me this morning and only you will know whether I succeed in it. One is to try and show you that there is a very significant link between what was going on on Palm Sunday on the one hand and secondly, my second challenge is I have to come back on Tuesday evening and give a lecture on exactly the same passage and I want to try and avoid repetition.

So that those of you who come on Tuesday evenings and more are welcome but those of you who do come and have made it a kind of Lenten discipline, the bottom line is you'll get something different.

See that's really enthused you. So what I want to talk about at first is that amazing story of the triumphal entry and the incredible way in which the crowd on that first Palm Sunday welcomed Jesus with respect and honour, throwing down palm leaves and their coats to give him honour and glory.

[1 : 54] And then just five days later and then just five days later, shouting crucify. Got to be something going on there.

I mean, if for no other reason I say this, it reminds me of my fickleness as a Christian. How easy it is that I can be tripped up on things that I should have put to death years ago in my life.

And what I want to say is the common thread between the first Palm Sunday and Ephesians 6 verses 10 to the end is a very important principle.

It's a theological principle but interestingly it's also a philosophical principle. And it's this, that if we start with wrong assumptions, the outcomes will be both unpredictable and potentially tragic.

On the 28th of January 1986, something horrific happened. Can anybody remember what that was? No?

[3 : 14] No?

That if we ■ That if ■ That if ■!

That if ■ That ■ shuttle. And an engineering company immediately before the launch gave a report which said that in low temperatures this particular component may not work.

The day of launch it was minus one at the launch site. The O-rings failed. The second was this kind of philosophical thing and that is what they call deniable resistance. So the principle is that if you've had a component throw a mistake in the past but it didn't cause any serious ramifications, that is kind of plausible deniability.

And you can go ahead despite this fault being manifest. And the third thing was, and this is truly shocking to me, the pressure to get that launch done on that date, on that time was immense.

[5 : 23] It came from the media, it came from the general public and even more shockingly it came from the American government. I don't know if this is true but it is written up there.

The president sent a message on the day of the launch and just says, get this thing done, right? And look what happened.

You start to make wrong assumptions and you will end up with unpredictable and sometimes tragic, tragic outcomes.

What was wrong on that Palm Sunday? Were there any assumptions that weren't right? Well, I think you can quite clearly see that there were.

The first thing is, Jesus chose to make his entry to Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. I mean, that would be a bit like Lewis Hamilton showing up at a Formula One Grand Prix in a larder.

[6 : 30] With apologies to any larder owners in the congregation. Inappropriate. What would have been more fitting for a king would have been a horse.

An animal of nobility as opposed to a beast of burden. This story is kind of pregnant with little clues that the congregation who were shouting Hosanna didn't really understand what was going on, their assumptions were all wrong.

They were shouting Hosanna. Save now. That's what it literally means. In that culture at that time, that was a political slogan held by Jewish activists who wanted to create an insurrection and get rid of the Romans.

Jesus didn't come to be a political Messiah. He didn't come to defeat the enemy out there.

He came to defeat the enemy that's in us all. Romans 3 verse 23 All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. What Jesus came to do was to save us from the consequences of our sin.

[7 : 59] And that ended up on Good Friday on that cross of Calvary. Sometimes shut my eyes and think of Jesus on that cross who died for my sin and for your sin and for the sins of all who turned to him in faith.

The assumption that was wrong was that Jesus was going to be a political Messiah and when they saw him imprisoned and being spat upon and tortured, they thought they'd dream.

They thought they'd woken up and it was a nightmare. And the one who they thought would bring victory over the Roman army ended up being beaten in worldly terms.

The unpredictable outcome was that the crowd that shouted Hosanna ended up screaming hysterically, crucify.

I don't know that anybody on the eve of that first Palm Sunday would have guessed that. But it made me wonder as I read Ephesians chapter 6, is it true that it's common that Christians often make wrong assumptions about God?

[9 : 43] I know Ephesians chapter 6 kind of gets your weird meter flickering a bit. When Paul writes stuff like this, our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm.

See, there's an assumption here that I think we make that this is kind of the product of some weird and ancient cosmology that educated and sophisticated people like us can't believe that kind of demonology stuff.

But can we afford to avoid it? Is it a wrong assumption to think that this is the writing of another time?

And then there are some Christians. It's an amazing dichotomy, I think. And the dichotomy is this, that I think the majority of certainly good old Anglican churchgoers don't take this seriously at all. They think this is just weird stuff and, you know, maybe Paul had a bad day or something. But it's a reality. It's in Scripture.

[11 : 17] It can't be so easily dismissed. And the dichotomy on the other end is there are people who are obsessed by this idea and find the devil under every unturned stone in every soul's life.

Surely, there is both truth and there is balance to be heard in Ephesians chapter 6. And the tragic outcome, I think of us ignoring this writing of St. Paul, occurred, we can read about in Romans chapter 1.

This is a very severe indictment written by St. Paul about a godless society. He says this, for although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like the mortal man and the birds and animals as reptiles.

And then this terrifying verse, terrifying pronouncement over a godless society. God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts.

[12 : 54] See, somehow, somehow, you have to explain the way the world is. The tragic outcome of us ignoring this stuff that St. Paul is writing here is the world that you and I live in.

I think St. Paul might have summarized his teaching saying, just start how you mean to go on.

Get your assumptions right because if we don't, we will end up where we are and we will know why we are there. Paul talks about, in the first phrase, the rulers and authorities.

Normally, in the New Testament, when those are referred to, they're referring to human beings who've become unrighteous and got it wrong. I suppose, in the last century, there are some terrifying examples of that.

Nazism. What a shocking idea. Racism. What a shocking idea. Stalin's attempts to force people into communism.

[14 : 23] One of the things that we forget, for instance, about the Ukraine is that Stalin starved to death up to six million Ukrainians. See, this stuff is not just the product of somebody who's a bit iffy morally.

This is concerted, systemic, horrific behavior. And for those of you who buy the argument that Nazism only spread because people were scared of the ramifications of not supporting it, I'm sure there was an element of that, but there is plenty of evidence, a whole book written about it, which is the letters of German soldiers writing home to their parents, boasting that they stabbed a Jewish baby that same day.

You want to sit tight to this teaching? You need to be very, very careful. And Paul goes on from there, and I think this is where our weird meters really start to flick in Ephesians chapter 6.

And he then talks about not just the rulers and authorities, he goes on, our struggle's not against flesh and blood, against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Wow. That does sound weird, doesn't it? The problem is these malign forces that exist outside our kind of human existence very often work through influencing human beings.

[16 : 17] People like you, and people like me. You get these amazing, amazing and horrible facts that in the 1940s, towards the end of the 40s, all this optimistic stuff was being written about, we won't ever allow this to happen in the world again, and we'll build a new society and a new community.

All sounded great, but then we discovered that Nazism is growing in the Nordic countries.

Reckoned generally to be the most civilized societies in Europe, they have a burgeoning, angry, vicious, right wing waiting to influence the way society should be as far as they are concerned.

That's why we are where we are. And I call this talk and my stuff on Tuesday, the forever war. What is Paul's main point here?

Very simple in a way. His main point is a spiritual enemy needs to be approached and engaged with spiritual weapons, not the weapons of this world.

[17 : 45] world. I want to talk some more about that on Tuesday evening. But it's a very simple idea, isn't it?

I mean, you wouldn't feel it would be appropriate with you to go and play a game of hockey using an axe instead of a hockey stick.

might have crossed your mind, but you haven't done it. You wouldn't think that it would be appropriate for our marines to go into war with water pistols.

No. You have to define the enemy and then work out what will be the tools that will defeat that enemy.

I want to remind you of something really important. And again, I think, because the way the world is, we're inclined to kind of forget this.

[18 : 55] That we are fighting not for victory, but we're fighting from victory. New Testament gives us plenty of examples of this kind of teaching.

The idea that on the cross of Calvary, Jesus defeated Satan once and for all.

And you say, hang on, how can that be? How can the world be the way it is if Jesus has already defeated the devil and those authorities in the heavenly realms?

well, I agree, that's a difficult problem to explain. I kind of think of it like this, and I hope this is helpful.

I am told, I'm not a farmer and never have been, but I am told that if you take a chicken in the yard and you chop its head off, it will race around the farmyard in a rather frenzied way and then drop dead.

[20 : 06] I think we live in a season where in a sense the devil's head has been chopped, but he's still creating carnage in this farmyard called the world.

And finally, that victory over the devil will be complete on the day of the Lord, when the Lord returns and pulls down the curtain on human history.

victory. We're fighting from victory, not for victory. You are, to quote the parlance of the modern business science world, you are winners if you are disciples of Jesus Christ.

And Paul's advice to us is to be strong. Be strong. In other words, don't be afraid. There's no need to fear.

You're fighting from victory, not for it. Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. I wonder today if I said to you, give yourselves a mark out of ten in terms of how strong do you feel in the Lord.

[21 : 32] Ten out of ten being, you're somebody I can't imagine. One out of ten being, you haven't even thought about this.

I suspect that most of us would not rank ourselves, maybe for reasons of humility, maybe not, but I don't think we would rank ourselves particularly highly in terms of where we are.

So I want to end today by suggesting six things that you might like to think about. All I think, based on the assumption that this spiritual war that's going on is real, and whether we accept it or not, we're caught up in it.

what can I do? Well, first thing is, I always think this is a commendable spiritual lesson, and I learnt it from the special boat services and the Navy seals, you know, absolutely top military personnel, trained, trained, trained, and ready for action.

But I think we shouldn't be passive about this spiritual war, but we should head to the cause of the trouble. Cause of the trouble, according to Paul, are these rulers and authorities, these forces in the cosmic places.

[23 : 05] The second thing is, and if you want to know about this, come along on Tuesday evening, understand the weaponry that God has supplied you with. The third thing is, audit your assumptions.

I think we Christians carry around all kinds of weird assumptions which get us in big trouble. Shall I tell you one? How often have you heard it said, there's no such thing as an unanswered prayer? As an unanswered prayer? No, James tells us in his epistle, you don't ask, and when you do ask, you ask from selfish motives.

Of course God's not going to recognise that. Mature prayer is praying for what God wants in any and every situation, not just praying for what I want. I remember a pastor's wife saying in a home group one day, not my wife incidentally, she was talking about, well she was really talking about the idea of what we call the prosperity gospel.

That is, if you come to Jesus you'll be wealthy. Some of you are still waiting, right? And she said, quite openly, she said, I believe, somebody challenged her and said, well your husband drives around in a brand new, you know, top of the range Volvo, this is the pastor.

[24 : 34] And she said, well I believe, if we prayed for a bike, what God would have given us a bike, but if we prayed for a Volvo, top of the range, God would give us a top of the range Volvo.

Is it really? Wrong assumption. If you ask from selfish motives, I should tell you that the pastor paid for this by taking the lion's share out of a local trust, which was meant for the maintenance of the building, but somehow in his own mind he settled on the idea of buying a top range Volvo.

No such thing as an unanswered prayer. Everybody in this church knows what it is to say a prayer which is unanswered. Sometimes God knows best, right?

There are all kinds of other examples of Christians who make poor assumptions. I mean, you know, obviously today one of them would be that if you ignore the spiritual battle, you make yourself vulnerable.

Audit your assumptions. Ask yourself, do some of the things I say and believe in relation to my faith are actually right?

[26 : 02] Because if they're not, they're going to lead you into trouble. Fourthly, put on the full armor of God.

You read about it there. It's not entirely clear what that is from reading it, but as I say, if you want to know more about that, come along on Tuesday. Promise no more cheap plugs.

Fifthly, engage with Scripture. I can't tell you this enough, but part of the reason why so many Christians have suspect assumptions is they don't know their Bibles.

else. I don't know, again, if I ask you the question, give yourself a mark, one out of ten, sorry, one to ten, on whether you know your Scripture, what would you say?

There was a principle in English law, which was, I can't remember it, justice non excusat, what's the last verb?

[27 : 19] Anyway, it means ignorance of the law is no excuse. Justice ignorant is non excusat. And you have to ask yourself the question, well, being ignorant of God's Word, is that really going to sound like a good excuse on the day of judgment?

How many of us really understand what Jesus did for us on the cross? How many of us really understand what the humanity of Jesus cost him?

the crown of thorns here, and believe me, I really hurt myself just putting it on there. Jesus had it rammed on his head.

Engage with Scripture that you might understand not just the what of Scripture, but the why of Scripture. Scripture. And finally, enlist today.

Stop walking in the darkness, believing that all our problems are just human problems, and that stuff like the spiritual realities that are malign and influence us are just not true.

[28 : 48] If you do do that, you're going to find a great excuse as to why the world is the way it is.

The motto of those American Navy Seals is this, the only easy day was yesterday.

What they mean by that is in their language, that's a constant need for physical and mental exertion and preparation. But I wonder if we truly believe that we should give the same level of exertion to our spiritual lives, to become spiritually vigilant.

You are fighting from victory. Paul wrote this in 1 Corinthians 15. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Not who will give, not a future but a present. And in all things, he wrote in Romans 8, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

[30 : 07] do you even feel like a conqueror? Do you even suspect that there might be some victory in the Christian life that you have not experienced and you're just constantly tripped up?

Enlist today. take up the weapons that God has given you and let's fight this spiritual battle that exists in our worlds, sometimes in our lives.

And let's wake up and become the church God wants us to be. Let's pray. Our Father, we want to pray against our apathy, our lack of understanding that leads to wrong assumptions.

Father, we need the solid food of your word. And we need to remember that according to Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, the hallmark, the primary characteristic of spiritual immaturity is this, worldliness.

the good news Bible puts it, living as the people of this world live. Father, would you please help us to be done with that and to enlist as serious disciples who take seriously your word and seek to amend our lives accordingly.

[32 : 22] God God will be. Father, send! send the Holy Spirit on your people gathered now. And Lord, let the work of that spirit do what your word tells us that your spirit can do for us and that is convict us.

Make it clear to us where we need to make improvements. Father, I pray that for myself as much as for any soul in this church today. Come down, O love divine, fill thou the soul of mine.

Lord, may your church awake and may we be ready to face the challenges of the world, the flesh, and the devil and to be conquerors.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.