

Palm Sunday: Louder Than Words - 2nd April 2023

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Thank you. Morning everyone. Good to see you. Good to see you. We're going to kick off early doors with our Bible reading for today which will be on the screen. This is a reading from John chapter 12 so have a look at this.

The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him shouting, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the King of Israel.

Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it. As it is written, Do not be afraid, daughter Zion. See, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt.

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.

Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him.

[1 : 14] So the Pharisees said to one another, See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him. One of the things about church life in general is the way in which certain days of the year get special names.

And today, as you'll be aware, is one of those days known as Palm Sunday. And admittedly, it's quite a quirky name to give a day. Right up there with Blue Monday, Ruby Tuesday, Sheffield Wednesday and so on, I guess.

But it stems from the day some 2,000 years ago, as we've just been seeing, when the crowds in Jerusalem waved palm branches to welcome Jesus as he rode into town on the back of a donkey. Now why palm branches? Why these palm crosses today? Well, back in the day, palm branches were symbols of triumph and victory. You know, the equivalent of getting flags out or football scarves perhaps.

These days, you know, a way of championing a team or a cause. Or in this case, on this particular Palm Sunday, a person. Jesus.

[2 : 27] Now, if the palm branch is all about triumph and victory, what is it that the crowd were feeling triumphant and excited about? Well, a couple of things, really. Because on a general level, there'd have been a real buzz around the city of Jerusalem since everyone was gearing up for the Passover festival.

So there'd be thousands of pilgrims and visitors busting around. But since Passover in particular was a festival that celebrated the story of the Israelites escaping from slavery back in Egypt hundreds of years prior to this.

It's likely, I think, in Jesus' day, people were themselves dreaming of something similar. Perhaps of a time when they might escape the clutches of the Roman Empire, which was ruling over them.

So it would have felt this Palm Sunday, wanting sort of freedom and victory and triumph and stuff, quite a political rally almost for people. That's the general feeling, it seems, in the town.

But more specifically, waving palm branches for Jesus, it seems the crowd were beginning a dream that he might be the leader for them.

[3 : 35] You know, this Messiah figure that they'd been waiting for. As we heard in the reading on this Palm Sunday, it said, Now the crowd that was with Jesus, when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to spread the word.

Many people, because they'd heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So news had spread that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead just down the road in a little village called Bethany, which meant that Jesus was therefore now being hailed as a hero.

Because if he could bring people back from the dead, as he proved he could with Lazarus, then I guess the people would be thinking, well, there's no need for us to be afraid of the Romans anymore. Because if they try and get us, Jesus can always bring us back.

Surely they thought Jesus was the God-given game-changer that the crowds had been waiting for. I think that's why the crowds chant this word, Hosanna. Hosanna means save us, save us from the Romans, it seems.

But it's not just Hosanna that they were shouting. In Matthew's Gospel, he tells us that they were shouting Hosanna to the Son of David. Why is this significant?

[4 : 49] Well, Son of David is a title which recalls King David, Israel's greatest ever leader. This guy from Michelangelo's famous sculpture.

I'll put it on the screen here. I don't know if you saw on the news this week in America that a teacher got fired for showing a picture of this nude sculpture in one of their art lessons, which sounds pretty ridiculous to me.

But to play it safe this morning, let's give him some pants. All right. Far be it from me to get in trouble.

All right. Giving him Calvin Clines there, only the best for King David. We'll leave those up to not distract you. Okay. So this is King David. This is King David.

The one who, a thousand years before Jesus, he's the guy who killed the mean Goliath, the giant, and then established the whole kingdom of Israel after that.

[5 : 46] So David, this guy here, was viewed as Israel's greatest ever king. But now, this son of David idea comes in, because Jesus is being hailed by the crowds as his worthy successor, this promised Messiah figure who would one day lead and bring freedom to God's people.

And so for the crowd, well, I guess this Palm Sunday procession, it must have felt a bit like a coronation of sorts. You know, here comes our new king, the son of David, his natural successor, who's going to overthrow Caesar.

And yet, in all of their excitement and their desire for this new leader, this new king to come, it seems to me that the crowd missed a very significant thing in this procession, which was staring them, perhaps, in the face.

The fact that the one they were hailing as king was riding in, not on a horse or a chariot, as you might expect of royalty, but on a donkey. And not even an adult donkey, but a colt, a foal of a donkey.

You know, for someone riding into town, so they assume to take it by storm, it's hardly an intimidating entrance, is it? Lolloping in on a donkey. Indeed, the writer, Nick Page, he sums up this scene like this.

[7 : 13] He says, Jesus is riding a donkey a few sizes too small for him, like a grown man riding a kid's bike. I mean, put like that, it's quite a bizarre, sort of farcical, even comical image.

It's almost like those clowns in the circus, you know, riding those tiny bikes, almost playing the fool, it seems here, Jesus. And yet, just as clowns, just as court jesters and so on, are often the wisest or the most perceptive of characters of all.

I think, in arranging for a little donkey for him to ride on, I think Jesus knew exactly what he was doing here. See, he's mocking, he's satirizing, he's sending up all of the pomp and the pride, all of the force and the fear that Caesar, that Pontius Pilate, that all the Roman rulers would normally arrive into town with.

Instead, on this little donkey, Jesus is saying, yeah, I'm coming as a king to usher in a new kingdom, but not as the warmonger on horseback, you might imagine.

No, I'm coming as the prince of peace. I'm coming as the servant king, whose kingdom is one of gentle humility. But what's fascinating in all this is that even Jesus' disciples, you know, the ones who've gone to collect this donkey, they didn't seem to grasp the significance of what this donkey-riding arrival was all about.

[8 : 49] John's Gospel tells us this, that at first, his disciples didn't understand all this. So why a donkey in particular? What's going on? Why didn't he just walk into town?

Well, as John mentions in his account, it seems Jesus has arranged to ride in on a donkey because he's aware of an ancient prophecy from the Old Testament book of Zechariah, which says this, it says, You know, it's clearly not a prophecy that the disciples were familiar with or that they remembered at the time since they didn't understand what was going on.

They didn't understand the significance of this donkey. Indeed, as John goes on to say, only after Jesus was glorified, in other words, after he'd been resurrected, did they realise that these things in Zechariah had been written about him.

But to go back to that Zechariah prophecy, I think it contains some of the clues that are needed for us to understand the kind of Messiah, the kind of king that Jesus was.

So we don't have to find Jesus. No, your king comes to you. And what kind of king is he? Well, he's lowly, riding on the foal of a donkey of all things.

[10:21] And interestingly, in the next verse after this one in Zechariah, God goes on to say through this prophecy to Zechariah, he says, I will take away the chariots and the war horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken.

He, this donkey riding Jesus, will proclaim peace to the nations. See, Jesus' Palm Sunday procession, I think, is actually him communicating, in quite a mischievous, subversive, certainly memorable way, just what his kingdom was all about.

You know, in some ways, he doesn't need to say much, because in effect, the donkey does all the talking for him. You know, it's a visual aid to demonstrate the kind of king he was, lowly, gentle, humble, peaceful.

Yes, Jesus had come to save his people, but he'd come to do that, not by promoting the pious or the powerful or the privileged, but by loving the last and the lost and the least.

You know what, this idea of Jesus, letting his actions speak louder than his words, in terms of the kind of king, the kind of messiah he'd come to be, I think it's actually more common in the Gospels than we might think.

[11:46] So, for example, you may have read or picked up, perhaps, in some of your readings in the Bible, or wondered, perhaps, about those times when Jesus tells people not to tell others about him or share who they thought he was.

So, in Mark's Gospel, for example, we read about a time when Jesus asked his disciples, who do you say I am? And Peter answered, you are the Messiah. But Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

Now, why would Jesus order them not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah? It's a very strange thing to say. I mean, it sounds like he's missed the trick. The pennies finally dropped for Peter here. Surely it's about getting the message out there, then.

But it's not just here that Jesus doesn't want people to say who he is. So, again, for example, we read that when Jesus was at home in the town of Capernaum, we're told this, that the whole town gathered at the door where Jesus was staying, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. So, although he's happy to heal loads of people, and that's very public, it seems, here it seems Jesus doesn't want people to talk about him.

[13:11] But then what's even more puzzling, perhaps, is that not only does Jesus tell people, demons even, to keep quiet about who they thought he was, he doesn't even talk about his own identity much in the Gospels, either.

Indeed, there's only three occasions when Jesus positively states that he is the Messiah in the Gospels. Three occasions.

Once with the woman at the well in a kind of private conversation with her. Once when he's praying with his disciples at the Last Supper. And once when he's being interrogated by the high priest on the night before his crucifixion.

Three times across the whole of the Gospels. And two of those occur just in the last 24 hours of his life. So again, what's going on here?

Well, it could be, I think, that Jesus is aware that most people assumed that the Messiah would be this warrior, this violent kind of leader who'd slayed a wicked with a sword and all that kind of thing.

[14:24] And so perhaps because Jesus doesn't want to be associated with that kind of wrong idea, he tells people to keep a lid on it, to keep quiet. And I think there's probably some truth in that, in that this Messiah label has become too loaded over the years, too misunderstood a title to be useful for Jesus.

Perhaps there's something in that for us to learn from about labels as well. And that when labels associated with our faith, words like evangelical or born again Christian or even Church of England, when they become so associated in people's minds with words like intolerant or irrelevant, well,

maybe we'd do well to be careful with how we choose to define ourselves or the kinds of time-consuming debates about stuff that we get drawn into.

Now, this risk of being labelled and the preconceived baggage which comes with that, maybe that's why Jesus didn't want people shouting from the rooftops that he was the Messiah.

But interestingly, I think, another answer might come from a short story that we read about in Luke's Gospel where after Jesus has been, again, publicly healing all sorts of people, a couple of followers of John the Baptist, he had his own disciples.

John the Baptist by now had been imprisoned. These couple of followers, they visit John in prison to tell him about all these healings and all that Jesus has been up to. And then this happens.

[16:02] We'll see how Luke describes it in his Gospel. John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, Are you the one who is to come?

Or should we expect someone else? When the men came to Jesus, they said, John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, Are you the one who is to come? Or should we expect someone else?

At that very time, Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses, and evil spirits and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard.

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. John the Baptist sends two of his followers to ask Jesus, Are you the one?

[17:18] Are you the Messiah? In other words. But Jesus doesn't send an answer back to John the Baptist saying, Yeah, of course I'm the Messiah and here's the theological reasons which back up that claim.

Now Jesus, it seems, really wasn't interested in talking about the theory of things. Instead, as we saw, he sends a message telling these men simply to share with John what they've seen and what they've heard.

People are being healed and the good news of God's loving provision is being preached to the poor. In other words, I think it's the same idea as the donkey as a vigilade on Palm Sunday.

Yes, Jesus knows who he is very well, but it seems he wants people to work that out for themselves through what they see and what they hear, you know, through what they experience of him themselves.

Jesus wants them to work out who he is by the way they see his love in action, not simply from being told by others who they think he is. That's why I think he, as the word, became flesh because actions really do speak louder than words.

[18:41] And if that's Jesus' preferred way for people to encounter the good news of his love, then I'd suggest that that might have profound implications for us and the way that we are to share the good news of Jesus with those around us.

In fact, the good news of the good news is that by far the most effective way to share it is by living it. To be kind, to be generous, to be considerate, to be compassionate.

Those are all the things that with God's help we can all be ways that we can all live. We might not always have the right words or the right theology, if you like, to explain God to people.

But we can all demonstrate what God's love looks like in practice with the way we care for those around us. As Jesus himself said, if you love each other, everyone will know that you are my disciples.

Now you might say, okay, hang on a bit though because people need to understand the gospel.

They need to know the Bible. They need to learn about repentance, how to pray, how to worship.

[19:58] They need to consider justice and judgment and so on. And yes, I completely agree.

They're all good things to know about. But that's where, I think as I was saying the other week, being part of a community, being part of a church, that's where that comes in because all of that stuff over the years can be learned and absorbed and wrestled with, worked out together.

That's where what Helen was saying last week about story comes in because we can all share our stories about how we've seen God at work in our own lives, both through the good times and the bad times.

But as important, I think, as words may be, unless there is love, unless there is kindness, unless there is joy, our words, as Paul says, will simply be a resounding gong or a clanging bell.

There are always exceptions, but on the whole, I think Jesus shows us that people aren't going to be persuaded by the theory of who Jesus is as much as they will be open to him when they experience the difference that his love makes in practice.

And I think that's what we're seeing evidence of here in our community. Things like the Monday service and dropping with little friends, FNF, with our Sunday stars, with this service, and so on.

[21 : 28] We really don't publicise much for any of the groups or our services. A little bit on Facebook, but that's about it. But I think folks are coming because people are sharing with their friends what they've seen and what they've heard.

What they've experienced, if you like, of what God's love looks like in practice. And my hope, certainly my experience of seeing you in action, is that they're encountering God's love through you and you and you.

Now equally though, I'm fully aware as a church, that puts a high bar for what we do and how we do it. And we won't always get it right, you know, far from it. We're as flawed as any other community, as any other church.

And loving people consistently is far from easy, it's far from straightforward. But the hard thing is, when we get it wrong, as we do and as we will, people will be hurt by that, even unintentionally. I mean, you'll have your off days when you don't feel very loving, you don't feel very kind. and it's a cast iron guarantee that there will be times when I will disappoint you as vicar.

[22 : 47] And that's not a kind of woe is me, that's just a fact. I can't please all the people all the time, you will be disappointed with me. But if the donkey riding Jesus is our model for what love looks like in practice, then all we can do in all our flaws, in all our failings, in all our attempts to love people is point to the fact that we're following a saviour who calls us to love others as he has first loved us with humility.

And that means that even when we do fall short, Jesus comes to us offering forgiveness for where we've gone wrong, healing for those who we have wronged, and perhaps most of all he offers us transformation that we might live ever better, kinder lives following his footsteps.

And perhaps the best part, I think, of this idea of Jesus' awareness that love in action speaks louder than words is that it makes it far easier for others, for those on the fringes of things, for those who don't quite know what they do believe about him, to join in and become part of a community of faith. A community which doesn't pretend to know all the answers, certainly doesn't always get it right, but a community who are simply wanting to follow Jesus and invite others along on the journey with them.

And so on this day of Palm Sunday, as we remember Jesus' own journey to the cross this week, a journey which starts with this lowly donkey ride, I think my prayer is that God would guide us through this week in ways which grow in us, such a deepening love for him, such a deepening love for each other, that our lives might reflect his love, love which we see in action through Jesus' life, death, and next week his resurrection.

[25 : 02] Amen. Amen.