

Palm Sunday 13th April 2025

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: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] We're going to start our Palm Sunday thinking this morning with a Bible reading about Jesus's journey into Jerusalem, a journey which helps explain why today is known as Palm Sunday.

And the Palm Sunday story appears in all four of the Gospels, which kind of tells us that it's a pretty significant event in Jesus's life. But for today, we're just going to pick one of them. We won't have all four readings back to back. That would be excessive.

We're going to pick one which is coming from Luke's Gospel today. So we'll see how Luke describes the events of what happens. After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden.

Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, why are you untying it, say, the Lord needs it. Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them.

[1 : 14] As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, Why are you untying the colt? They replied, the Lord needs it. They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt, and put Jesus on it.

As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen.

Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest. So, Jesus and his disciples, they're approaching these two villages called Bethany and Bethpage, and starting at the bottom right on the screen there, they're going to follow that red line all the way up to Jerusalem.

And I say all the way, it's only really a couple of miles from Bethany up to Jerusalem. So, perhaps maybe from here to sort of just beyond Swan Island. You know, not that long a walk for these 20, 30-something Jesus and his disciples and so on.

An easy walk, perhaps, for those seasoned travellers to make. And yet they don't walk. Jesus instead makes a point of requesting a donkey ride into town. I guess it's like the Uber of his day, perhaps.

[2 : 44] He sends two of his disciples to go and get the donkey, presumably from Bethany, the first of these two villages, as that's the nearer of the two where they're coming from.

And that in itself perhaps might be interesting, because as we were looking at the other week, if you were here, Bethany was this village whose name means house of the afflicted, probably because it was a leper colony in Jesus' day.

So, from the start of his journey, Jesus, it would seem, deliberately begins in Bethany, deliberately begins in this house of the afflicted, deliberately, it seems, empowering those who the rest of society would perhaps choose to shun, to instead play a major part in this significant day.

Indeed, the disciples are told that if anyone asks, the Lord needs it, the Lord needs this donkey. That's all they need to say to the donkey's owner, which again implies this relationship, this familiarity, I suppose, with Jesus, a friendship between Jesus and those in this village of Bethany.

They know who he is. What's more, we're told that Jesus specifies that the donkey is to be a cult, a young donkey, one which has never been ridden.

[4 : 11] And that's probably why in some of the gospel accounts, in that little clip there, if you were sharp-eyed, there were two donkeys that appear. It's probably the mum donkey who may have come along for the ride as well as a comfort for her younger one on perhaps their first big trip out.

And so Jesus, we're told, rides this cult, this young donkey into Jerusalem. Now we're told the people spread their cloaks on the ground, a sign of respect and deference perhaps.

And in other gospels, we're told that they also waved palm branches, ancient symbols of triumph and support, a bit like football supporters waving their scarves or flags, to support their team.

Why this sense of triumph though? Why this sense of celebration? Well, because it seems the crowd sensed that this was Jesus' moment, his arrival as a coming king.

Indeed, we're told this, that the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they'd seen. Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.

[5 : 26] Which you might recognize is a quote from that psalm that we started the service with. Psalm 118, which was seen as a prophecy about Jesus coming as king, as this Messiah figure.

Now, all this was taking place in the week leading up to the Passover festival in Jerusalem, a massive festival celebrating the ancient Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt.

But with the Jewish people now being under control of the Roman Empire, well, you can imagine the atmosphere and the kind of political edge to it all.

People desperate to be liberated from the Roman Empire, just as they had been liberated from Egypt generations before. And Jesus was seen by many as the one to do that liberation.

Some of the other gospels record the people as shouting, Hosanna, which means save us, save us, if you like, from the oppression of the Romans. How would Jesus save people from oppression?

[6 : 29] Well, while some would have wanted Jesus to be this fighter, this warrior king, and lead a violent rebellion against Rome, as he's probably said every year on this Palm Sunday, the liberation that Jesus had come to lead and the kind of king Jesus had come to be was the exact opposite of a warrior who'd win through violence.

And the clues for that, I think, are all there, not least in the fact that Jesus chooses to ride in a town, not just on a donkey, but on the cult of a donkey.

A donkey, we might say, a couple of sizes too small for him. It's a bit like, I guess, a kind of clown riding a kid's bike into a circus.

You know, it's that kind of idea. It's deliberately farcical. You know, this slow, lollipin, plodding little donkey. You know, hardly the choice of a bruiser who'd come to take on the Roman Empire by force.

Instead, it seems, it's Jesus' way of sending up, of satirizing, of using a kind of comic image, really, to undercut all of the pomp and the power and the privilege of the establishment.

[7 : 48] What kind of king rides a donkey? Well, Jesus does. For Jesus, he'd come not as a superior king, but as a servant king, not to take power, but to empower, not to control, but to care, not to instill fear, but to implore forgiveness.

Now, Jesus comes as the one who turns everything upside down so that the last and the least are instead the first and the foremost in his thinking.

It's a radically different, radically peacemaking approach to life, calling us to treat others as we would want to be treated, regardless of how they've treated us.

It's a call, in other words, to love our enemies and not take revenge or retribution or violence against them.

And the donkey stuff, well, I guess in requesting this ride, it seems Jesus is clearly aware of an ancient prophecy in the Old Testament book of Zechariah, which says this.

[8 : 54] It says, See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

So righteous and victorious, yeah, there's a new right winning way of living for Jesus to establish. For Jesus to establish. But that's not done by domination or decree, not through weapons or war, but as it says here, through being lowly, through identifying with the least, the last, the lost, the afflicted in Bethany and so on, so that domination and darkness and death can be overcome by light and love and life.

That's the way of Jesus. A way recognized by his disciples following him who declared these words, Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.

Words which you might think echo the message of peace that the angels brought at Jesus' birth. You know, the message of peace, if you like, bookends Jesus' whole life.

Now, as we look at Jesus' life, none of this approach though, towards peace, towards liberation and so on, none of that I don't think should surprise us.

[10 : 14] Because it's Jesus who tells us not to take revenge, even revenge that we might think is proportionate and justified like an eye for an eye.

You know, instead we're to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us because as Jesus said, blessed are the peacemakers. It's Jesus who tells us not to top up the number of times we forgive someone, but to keep on forgiving until we lose count effectively.

It's Jesus who says that when someone hits us on the right cheek, don't fight back, but turn to them the other cheek as well. It's Jesus who, when Peter pulls out a sword and with a good aim, chops the ear off one of those who'd come to arrest Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus says, no more of this, no more of this before he heals this guy's ear.

And he follows it up by saying, look, put your sword back in its place for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. You know, highlighting that ultimately violence only leads to more violence.

Now, he lives in a violent world and at times, yes, Jesus uses the language of violence sometimes to make his point. So for example, in Matthew's gospel, we read of Jesus saying this, that I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

[11 : 48] which sounds weird, sounds inconsistent thing for Jesus to say. And yet, in a parallel passage in Luke's gospel, this idea of a sword, it's not literal, it's a metaphor.

Because in Luke, he puts it like this, he says, do you think I've come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division, division. Now, division though?

Well, I guess yes. You know, if people, as Jesus seems to say, if people are called to choose between their own way or God's way, then of course that's going to divide opinion.

That's going to divide people. You know, it's not a cheap peace that Jesus has come to bring. It's not like glossing over things like things don't matter.

Nah. These are real life choices Jesus is talking about. Choices that he knows needs to be made by each of us if there's to be a lasting, we might say, a deep peace.

[12 : 52] Indeed, as Dave said last week, when Jesus turned the tables of the money changers over in the temple, it wasn't violence against people here, but really anger against the stuff of the system, you know, the system that exploited and oppressed people.

Jesus' righteous anger in this story shows that his way of peace and love is anything but fluffy. Nah, it's radically serious.

It's radically challenging to those who would seek to oppress or exploit others. So radically serious that as we'll see this week, it would eventually end up costing Jesus his life.

And this dual reality of the deadly serious nature of Jesus' message of loving enemies, well, that, I would suggest, is a way in to help us work out what this whole upside-down, non-violent, peacemaking way of Jesus might look like in our lives and in our world today.

You see, in all of this, that's the kind of classic understanding of Palm Sunday, I grant you. If you've been to church over the years, you'll have heard something pretty similar, I imagine, year in, year out.

[14 : 16] But what do we do with this teaching, this example of a donkey riding, turning the other cheek, Jesus, when countries like Ukraine are faced with an invading Russian army?

How might Jesus respond as a Palestinian in the face of an Israeli government who seem hell-bent on wiping the people of Gaza out? How would Jesus want us to respond when a loved one of ours is being physically attacked or abused?

In other words, how do we love our enemies in the face of violence and oppression that we might rightly instinctively feel compelled to challenge?

Well, they're tough questions for us to navigate, but I think what I want to suggest this morning is that in Jesus, we see someone who faces violence head-on, but he does so through non-violent resistance.

The non-violence of Jesus, that's clear. Not once does Jesus fight back physically or endorse that response, but I think the resistance is also clear because not once is Jesus indifferent or passive to violence, rather he finds incredibly creative ways to challenge and overcome violence.

[15 : 52] So, for example, let's think of a few things when he does this. For example, when he encounters a woman caught in adultery and about to be stoned to death, Jesus doesn't just let it happen.

He steps in and he declares this, that if any of you who are accusing her is without sin, let him be the one to throw a stone at her.

Jesus essentially forces her accusers to look in a mirror at their own faults. He forces them to acknowledge that they're in no position to judge.

And her accusers, you know, publicly shamed by their actions, we're told they kind of drift away, they slink away.

Their own self-knowledge has meant that they no longer feel inclined to act violently towards this woman. Or again, when Jesus says this, when he says, if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to them, the other, also.

[16 : 53] Now, I don't think it's Jesus' way of saying, look, just take a beating, just lap it up, honestly. I don't think that's what Jesus is saying, but rather, I'd say it's Jesus' way of saying, look, make your oppressor see you as the equal that you are.

How does he do this? Well, we looked at this before, a good few years ago now, but in Jesus' day, it's worth saying that the right hand was the dominant hand in that culture.

It was the hand that you did most things with. I'm left handed, I wouldn't have survived a day, I tell you, it was a right handed culture. You did everything from eating to fighting with your right hand.

And it was the hand of honour as well, that's why Jesus is described as sitting at the right hand of God, it's the place of esteem, it's the place of honour, the right hand side is best, if you like.

But the left hand side, on the other hand, that was seen as being inferior and unclean, primarily because it was the hand that you used when you went to the toilet.

[18 : 04] And that means you don't want to be eating and picking your teeth with the same hand that you've used 20 minutes ago, while at your convenience, shall we say.

So, in terms of fighting, you would always, in that culture, use the stronger, superior right hand. Which means that if someone hits you on the right cheek, your right cheek, if they're going to hit you with their right hand, they're going to have to slap you with the back of their hand.

They can't skew their arm and punch you with any force like that. It's going to have to be a backhanded slap because they'd use their right hand. Now, that is a put-down, isn't it?

It's not a punch. It's a put-down. It's a sign of disdain. It's a sign of superiority in a way that a slave might slap down their servant.

No, that a master might slap down their slave. Turning the other cheek though, if you turn your left cheek to your oppressor, now the oppressor would again use their right hand.

[19 : 15] But here, it would either need to be a palm slap to your left cheek or it would need to be a proper punch, wouldn't it?

Now, a palm slap, not a back of a hand, but a palm slap would say, you hurt me. You've hurt my feelings here. How dare you? You've hurt me in that sense.

Whereas a punch would say, I'm going to need to deck you here because I'm scared that you might deck me back if I don't hit you hard enough. It's a punch that says, I'm a bit concerned about who you are. I think you might get me if I don't hurt you first.

Either way, when you turn the left cheek, it means that as a victim, you're asking to be treated as an equal, as a full human, as someone whose opinion matters to your oppressor, hence the palm slap about you've hurt their feelings, or as someone who they know could be stronger than them.

It needs a punch to put you down. In other words, I think Jesus is saying, look, don't fight back, but don't just take it.

[20 : 25] Stand your ground. Resist being dehumanized. Offer the other cheek and say, look, treat me like an equal. If you're going to hit me, hit me, but treat me as someone who deserves that respect.

force them to treat you as an equal. All of which I think is designed to slowly but surely encourage the oppressor to see their victim as someone of worth, someone worthy of life, as someone who deserves better, as someone ultimately who has a lot more in common with them than they might think, as someone who is just like them.

and that renewed awareness, when combined with a love for enemies that also sees them, sees our oppressor as someone just like us, well, it's a way in which this desire for violence can be diluted and, I guess, ultimately killed by kindness.

We might call this a third way of Jesus. not a violent response, not a passive response, but rather a creative response, a creative non-violent form of resistance that forces oppressors to recognise the humanity of those they've been seeking to hurt.

And I'd suggest that assertiveness, that's a model which is not only worth pursuing in our world, but has actually been proven to work time and time again.

[22 : 07] So, for example, one recent study compared the outcomes of 323 conflicts that took place around the world between 1900 and 2006, over 100 years of conflicts.

Of those 323, where there was a violent response to an attack, a violent way of trying to fight back, a lasting solution, lasting peace we might say, was achieved in 26% of cases.

But when non-violent resistance was chosen, that proved to be effective in 53% of cases. Now, non-violence doesn't always work, but it's twice as effective in achieving peace and violence is.

And we've often seen that played out around the world where mass peaceful protests have led to regime change and dictators being removed without bloodshed, such as may well be the case with the mass protests that are happening in Turkey at the moment.

as I say, it doesn't always work, and I'm aware that those of us who've moved here from Hong Kong will have much more insight on this than me, but that pro-democracy story, that's not yet finished over there, and we hope that peaceful, non-violent resistance may still have a key role to play there.

[23 : 50] So if we think, for example, though, in terms of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I'm not going to stand here, I wouldn't dream of condemning Ukraine for fighting back, I'm not in their shoes, I don't know what that feels like, wouldn't condemn Ukraine for seeking international support and weapons, but one of the frustrations of that conflict is when it appears that the UK and others haven't necessarily pursued creative non-violent forms of resistance with as much urgency as they have with supplying weapons.

So, for example, economic sanctions against Russia, that would seem to be one of the ways to enact non-violent resistance in order to limit Russia's capacity for violence, and at some level, these sanctions, they've been in place for a while now, but it seems what we haven't managed to do as effectively is limit the way in which those sanctions can be undermined or circumvented.

For example, while the UK's export of vehicles to Russia has almost completely stopped in the last few years, as this table shows, if you can see that, during the course of the war, UK vehicle exports have gone through the roof to countries neighbouring or sympathetic to Russia, and it's not difficult to predict where these vehicles end up being delivered to.

Not only might these exported vehicles and the technology they contain be used or adapted for military use, they also risk undermining the way in which sanctions are designed to limit the supply of what everyday Russians need to lead a normal life so that they might then be provoked into rising up in peaceful protests against their rulers.

Sanctions are a good idea, but it needs commitment to make them work in a way which brings lasting peace. You know, with Russia, Ukraine, with Israel, Gaza, with other areas of conflict around the world, I'd suggest there's much more that could be done by other nations to empower local people towards non-violent resistance, whereas we often seem far too quick to supply weapons, thinking that this is the best or only way to resolve a conflict.

[26 : 29] Did it feel sometimes that we're not really giving peace the chance it deserves, let alone following Jesus' call to be peacemakers? That's big picture, international stuff, a much closer home.

I'd say the way of non-violent resistance is why we as a church support organisations like Pathway Project who encourage, enable, and empower victims of domestic abuse to escape their oppressors without the need to fight back or resort to violence in response to the abuse they've endured.

It needs that support but that's what Pathway enable to happen. But then alongside victims there's also a need say to champion restorative justice within our criminal justice system so that perpetrators might eventually be rehabilitated into society.

You know working with offenders to face their faults and empathise with their victims in much the same way that Jesus did with the crowd who wanted to stone that woman and so on and so on.

You know supporting victims working for peace resisting oppression in imaginative non-violent ways in other words loving our enemies in ways which bring healing to both them and us.

[27 : 56] None of this is simple none of this is easy but it is possible and it is something we do well not just to pray for but to try and put into practice wherever and whenever we can.

Indeed in a week as you'll know as well as me when President Trump's tariffs have caused havoc in the world's economy enabling the super rich to profit through insider trading while knowing that it will be the poorest around the world who will inevitably suffer most.

Just want to leave us with a quote from an American writer and pastor by the name of Brian Zand. He's writing with reference to America in particular.

It seems to me in light of the donkey riding Jesus' example of non-violent resistance and radical love I figured his words were relevant for us as we begin this holy week.

He says this. He says it's not the task of the church to make America great again. The contemporary task of the church is to make Christianity counter-cultural again.

[29 : 12] And once we untether Jesus from the interests of empire we begin to see just how counter-cultural and radical Jesus' ideas actually are.

Enemies love them. Violence renounce it. Money share it. Foreigners welcome them. Sinners forgive them.

These are the kind of radical ideas that will always be opposed by the principalities and powers by which the followers of Jesus are called to embrace announce and enact.

Amen. Amen.