

# Jesus & Inclusion - 28th March 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[ 0 : 0 0 ]    hey everyone good day to you my name's matt the vicar of st john's and it's a pleasure to be in your esteemed company once again as we settle in for another sunday session together the clocks have gone forward so if you're watching this on sunday i hope you're not too bleary-eyed as a result but the good news is the evenings will now feel a bit brighter for longer and all the signs of spring are beginning to well and truly take hold it's palm sunday the sunday before easter and today we'll be looking at so many events from this day some 2 000 years ago in the life of jesus to see what we can take from them for our life today likewise lot is on the palm sunday track with another sunday stars session over in that playlist do be our guest and check that out if you've got younger ones in your care and company as i said spring has now sprung and if you're like me and struggle a bit with the gloom of winter this new season is certainly a welcome boost for us in these tricky times indeed i was talking with one of the teaching assistants at a local school this week and she was sharing with me how heartbreaking it is to see so many previously confident children now carrying real anxiety and being weighed down by all that they're needing to adjust and readjust to i mean i remember when i was a child sometimes just feeling overwhelmed as if my little brain couldn't cope with what was being required of it well how much more must that be the case now in our younger ones who are required to cope with things which even us adults are struggling to handle yes we're generally moving forward but there is such a need for our younger ones and so many of us older ones as well to know healing and repair in our lives and yet just as the signs of spring move slowly but surely towards growth so do that's my prayer for you and for me whether we're young old or somewhere in the middle that slowly but surely we might experience a newness of life under god a gentle rebuilding of our confidence and nurturing of our nature so that we may know deep in our innermost being that all will be well and so god lift our spirits today we ask with your kindness and gentleness that however we're feeling we would know your sustaining and hopeful love may that be the case for each of us at whatever stage of life we're at but we do pray for the most vulnerable in our midst that they that we perhaps would know what it means to be supported by you god we know in jesus you reassure us with these words for my yoke is easy and my burden is light that sounds good to us so may we be able to stand a bit taller this week as you increasingly lift whatever weight we're currently carrying from our shoulders speak to us now as we tuck in as some palm sunday thoughts together and as we meet with you in this shared way may your ways your example your presence guide and shape our lives we ask thank you god amen all right well as i say it's palm sunday today and so by way of kicking things off here's the bible

story behind what today is all about from matthew's gospel chapter 21 as they approached jerusalem and came to bethphage on the mount of olives jesus sent two disciples saying to them go to the village ahead of you and at once you will find a donkey tied there with her colt by her untie them and bring them to me if anyone says anything to you say that the lord needs them and he will send them right away this took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet say to daughter zion see your king comes to you gentle and riding on a donkey and on a colt the foal of a donkey the disciples went and did as jesus had instructed them they brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for jesus to sit on a very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road the crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted hosanna to the son of david blessed is he who comes in the name of the lord hosanna in the highest heaven when jesus entered jerusalem the whole city was stirred and asked who is this the crowds answered this is jesus the prophet from nazareth in galilee now this event has come to be known as palm sunday because people waved palm branches and laid them on the ground before jesus palm branches being an ancient symbol of triumph and victory and so the crowds cheering jesus were greeting him in their eyes as the king who'd come to lead them to freedom from the roman empire i guess the phrase palm sunday is okay but it could equally be called donkey day as that's perhaps an even bigger part of the story jesus riding in a town on the back of a donkey now why don't we call it donkey day well because i guess it all sounds more suited to a day beside the seaside than a coming savior you know having a plodding donkey in the story it all sounds a bit comical perhaps if we're honest and yet in jesus time and indeed across the lands of the bible to this day donkeys were and are a key form of transport i mean i remember when i was in egypt a few years back visiting some church communities there i was struck by how many grown men on donkeys there were i got a bit snap happy with my photos because it was a novelty for me to see them but this one was my favorite though a three-legged donkey in this case the classic wonky donkey if you will and so when jesus rides into town on his presumably four-legged donkey well we can see it perhaps as a statement of identification on his part with everyday folks with everyday means of transport he wasn't coming in on a horse or a chariot as a king might be expected to but arriving on a down-to-earth donkey it seems it's jesus's way of saying look i'm with you i'm one of you i've come to be your king and savior not by making you feel small but by being on your level i know what it's like to be you so you can trust me and yet beyond this donkey ride as a way of identifying with everyday people jesus's arrival into jerusalem on the back of a donkey was fulfilling what an

ancient prophet called zechariah predicted would be the case when god's messiah now this savior comes to his people he says this see your king comes to you righteous and victorious gentle and riding on a donkey and so jesus arrives as a man of god and a man of the people son of god and son of man if you like holy yet humble it's little wonder the crowds cheered him almost a homecoming hero a people's prince someone who'd stick up for the underdog the outsider the excluded and so it's this background this context which feeds into what happens next as according to matthew's gospel having parked up his donkey jesus proceeds further into the city of jerusalem indeed here's the next bit of the story straight after the palm sunday bit again from matthew's gospel chapter 21 jesus entered the temple port and drove out all who were buying and selling there and drove out all who were buying and selling there he overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves it is written he said to them my house will be called a house of prayer but you are making it a den of robbers now why does jesus get so angry well it's fair to say he's hacked off that the temple area has been turned into a market full of dodgy dealing money changes and so on it's meant to be a holy place of prayer and worship and so in overturning tables driving out animals and traders and so on jesus exclaims you're making it a den of robbers distressed as he is by the shady practices of these rip-off merchants and yet there's probably something else going on at the same time which is worth noting because it ties in with this idea of jesus being the people's king the one who champions the cause of the excluded not siding with the elite you see we're told that the money changers and traders have been doing business in the temple courts now where are the temple courts well these courts this area was more formally known as the court of the gentiles as the name suggests this court was for gentiles the name given to non-jews this court this space was their place to pray and worship and there were strict rules stating that because they weren't jews they couldn't go any further towards the main temple sanctuary this was as near as they could get to the main stage you know the main area where the religious action really happened in fact in order to keep this strict order we know from accounts written at the time that king herod had built a wall to separate these allocated areas these different courts and he'd placed warning signs along this wall indeed about 150 years ago archaeologists found one of these warning signs

a stone inscription from this dividing wall it was written in greek so that foreigners had no excuse in understanding it and it said this no foreigner is to enter the barriers surrounding the sanctuary he who is caught will have himself to blame for his death which will follow and so if you weren't a jew not only were you excluded from praying in the main sanctuary area but there were signs strongly reminding you that if you kicked up a fuss or tried to get in you'd be executed i mean it's hardly the most uplifting of things to read when you're trying to worship god is it and yet as if those restrictions weren't bad enough when jesus entered the temple courts he found that even this outer area this court of the gentiles in which foreigners and non-jews had permission to worship in well that had become overrun with market traders and money changers and that i think is why jesus gets so angry not simply the fact that trading is taking place within the temple at all but that gentiles were being squeezed out of even the limited space they'd been allocated that's why jesus exclaims quoting from the prophet isaiah is it not written my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations for jews and for gentiles you know time and again in jesus life we see him challenge and seek to dismantle any practices whereby people feel excluded by others so for example on a personal level when his own disciples seek to exclude children from jesus's presence jesus says nah let the children come to me don't stop them or say when the very little man zacchaeus is excluded by the crowds from seeing jesus and has to climb a tree to have any chance of seeing him jesus makes a point of noticing zacchaeus calling him down from his treetop and he ends up going to his house for dinner a real act of inclusion more broadly perhaps in having women like mary magdalene joanna or mary and martha as his disciples jesus demonstrates gender inclusion when he notices the poor widow giving all that she has to the temple collection he commends her generosity as a way of championing economic inclusion when jesus heals the lame or those with leprosy it's a statement of physical inclusion for those others would seek to exclude when jesus doesn't condemn the woman caught in adultery or when he befriends the woman at the well with her checkered sexual history it's a message of social inclusion for those who may feel excluded because of their sexual practice or when jesus assures the criminal next to him on the cross of his place with him in paradise jesus models inclusion for those who know they're guilty and might feel they deserve to be excluded you see jesus exemplifies inclusion all the time welcoming and embracing those who others might seek to exclude whether on grounds of race ethnicity age status gender affluence physicality sexual ethics criminal background and more you know for this donkey riding trader trashing outsider welcoming jesus inclusion inclusion seems to be at the heart of his message of love and grace and so for us therefore well i suspect we do well to ask god to examine our hearts and see which people

groups or sectors of society we find it easier than others to exclude either consciously or subconsciously you know who winds us up who do we have little sympathy for who do we find it easiest to pin blame on first who would we like to avoid or wish they would go away as we bring those people to mind how do we imagine Jesus's treatment of them might be different might be more inclusive than perhaps our own might be and therefore how might we allow that to shape our ongoing mindset and yet as challenging and as necessary as that kind of exercise might be to do I wonder if it might also be helpful to just flip it around and look at it from the other side and by that I mean in what ways might we feel excluded in what ways do we feel perhaps that we don't quite fit in or that we're not welcome somewhere in what ways might we feel there's a dividing wall between us and others either because of who we are or what we've done you know a wall which we don't feel we've got permission or the ability perhaps to break through you see the more I listen to people talk and the more honest I'm prepared to be with myself I'm increasingly aware of how insecure and fragile most of us are yes there are a minority of folks who seem to have got the self-confidence thing cracked who don't seem to care really what others think of them who don't wrestle with self-doubt or an inner dialogue of uncertainty but I'm not sure that's many of us or maybe truthfully even any of us rather what I find is that most of us especially as a result of this last year have lost confidence have grown in self-doubt or can feel like we're somewhat on the outside I mean for example I heard about someone this week who's a guy I'd regularly pass on the street most days that I was out and about you know say hello to have a quick bit of banter with or whatever and who on the surface at least whenever I saw him seemed a pretty content kind of guy and yet as a relation of theirs told me this week apparently he's finally now gone to the doctor and admitted he's an alcoholic who's secretly been downing three sometimes four bottles of wine a night for the past year because he's just so lonely on the outside you'd never know but on the inside there's a whole other story or I can think of two different people who just this week have said how utterly ashamed they are of the mistakes they've made in life and that if people just knew what they'd done they'd be horrified and so the guilt they carry means that it's incredibly hard for them to feel worthy of being loved because they can't imagine loving themselves or I can think of a friend who on first impression comes across as incredibly confident cool good looking you know almost intimidatingly so and yet after a year or two of chatting with them well you discover instead how crippling shy they are where they dread going on to the school playground at pickup time because they don't know which

[ 20 : 33 ] other parents to speak to or what they would talk about anyway or similarly for me you know i know in my role as vicar i'm expected to ring people up or pop and see them and i do my best with that but if i'm brutally honest i struggle to do that as much as i should because in my head i'm thinking well why would they want to see me for why would i impose on their time like that and then i try and persuade myself oh come on you know you're a vicar get over yourself but then i know it'll be me going in role and not as me and that just compounds the problem in my head loneliness shame insecurity self-doubt these feelings and more are all things which can lead us to feel like an outsider it's not perhaps that anyone's deliberately excluding us but rather that we don't know how to bridge the gap in order to be included either it's almost like being stuck in that court of the gentiles knowing we can't go where the main action is happening but at the same time feeling squeezed out or sapped of confidence where we do find ourselves and so often our lack of feeling included can be interpreted as if we're excluding others in that by keeping ourselves to ourselves we give the impression of being unfriendly or uncaring whereas it's really that we don't quite know how to belong and when we don't quite know how to belong well that's where we end up doing things to our own detriment whether it's drinking too much eating too much spending too much working too hard becoming increasingly self-absorbed believing wacky conspiracy theories which dominate our minds watching porn or looking for acceptance and even love from people who are not healthy for us what's more it's so hard particularly in these current times to see a way out of that malaise that mindset and so what might an answer to this be well it's not straightforward but it seems to me that the inclusion which jesus models is perhaps the best place to start you see before anything can be fixed we need to know we belong we need to feel included and that means that i need to include you and you need to include me inclusion doesn't just happen rather it's an intentional act that takes courage and commitment but it has to start somewhere and if jesus's approach is anything to go by i'd say that inclusion begins by asking questions you know when you get the chance have a read through the gospels in the bible and notice how many times jesus asks someone a question you know what is your name who do you say i am do you want to get well why are you so afraid do you see anything why were you searching for me what are you discussing do you have anything to eat will you give me a drink has no one condemned you what do you think who is it you're looking for why are you troubled what do you want me to do for you and so on and so on and so on indeed overall jesus asks some 339 questions in the gospels and i'd say that's a key way in which he helped people to feel included he was genuinely interested in

them and so if we follow this example it'll mean asking god to give us the courage to speak to someone new it'll mean asking someone how they're doing even when all we want really is for someone to ask us how we're doing and as that same teaching assistant i was speaking to this week told me she said she's learned that she needs to ask her children twice before they're honest about how they're doing you okay she asks yes miss are you okay well not really miss and so a proper conversation begins yeah try it this week ask twice and see what happens intentional inclusion means not simply assuming that someone else is probably ringing or messaging that person but instead making that contact yourself and asking that person how they're doing intentional inclusion means probably asking someone if they want to go on a walk with you rather than hoping someone will ask you you know i know these kind of things take a lot of guts but if we apply the golden rule of loving our neighbor as ourselves to this that means we ask the questions we'd long to be asked and if everyone does that then we will be asked those questions too and if everyone listens well to each other's answers i think we'd be amazed how much our common life and our own well-being would improve indeed that's the other main benefit of following this jesus way of inclusion by asking questions because it opens up the way for us to share with each other our struggles and our hopes for the future as trust develops through deepening friendships the questions we feel able to ask of each other can really help us to be accountable to and supported by those who care for us and so there's permission to ask how much are you drinking these days did you manage to clear the air with your son did you ask your boss for that time off your road how have you been doing since your mum died you know all proper questions than others about your Brennan as he wanted to be serving out for a ongoing experience to pray that one part of the culture will go to help others who haven't reached her own conversation so very important i mean i would just be a network servant for healing that really want you to ü Paranad to do come to a project and there may be perhaps in the search result at the design and a beautiful life and archip is one of mine made in a world where is the pipeline itself which may not be permission to someone else to ask us the difficult questions and that'll mean some vulnerability on our part. But benefiting from mutual support can be so effective in helping us to stay on track in living the kind of life which reflects the way of Jesus. Indeed, allowing others to speak into our lives gives God a greater chance to speak to us through them. Asking someone else's opinion about what we're doing and whether it's the right course to take, well that gives God far more opportunity to inject some wisdom or a different perhaps better perspective into our lives than we ourselves on our own might have considered. And that's why I'd say true inclusion has to involve an element of challenge too, as to be included in the community means we need to both give and receive love. Love which requires

of us a desire to be kind and compassionate, just and generous and so on. Indeed when Jesus included people he didn't leave it as come as you are and stay as you are, no he also said follow me. He offered a challenge to allow his influence in his ways to shape their approach to life. So for example in including Zacchaeus, Jesus challenged him to change his ways and Zacchaeus did give him back all and more of what he'd taken through his dodgy tax collection. When Jesus included the woman caught in adultery, he didn't simply leave her as she was but told her to go and sin no more. Inclusion begins with grace, accepting and welcoming people as they are, but inclusion also means we want the best for each other and that means helping each other to live lives which reflects Jesus' life, Jesus' teaching, Jesus' ways.

You know it strikes me that as we enter this period known as Holy Week, this week in the run-up to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, we'd do well to embrace the inclusive love of Jesus. Love which welcomes everybody in just as they are, but love which also cares for people too much to leave them that way.

As we seek to be inclusive people this week, may the questions we ask, the wisdom we share, the lives we live, ever more reflect the ways of the donkey driving, table turning, humble, challenging, courageous Jesus, the one who calls us to follow him.

[ 30 : 54 ] Alright, let's leave it there for this week, but there is a chance to think through some of the questions this session might have raised in the extra time session available alongside this one. But for now, as is our tradition, let's turn to a song of praise of the God who loves us and leads us, the God in whom we can put our trust. I think this is a cracker of a track. It's the song called Battle Belongs.

The song called Battle Belongs. When all I see is the battle, you see my victory.

When all I see is the mountain, you see a mountain moved. So when I fight, I'll fight on my knees with a free love with thunder on your hand its way up, I watch a valley to call out.

I watch a offer that when it's lost, I select the sea, that helps at the sea that■■■, unlike Elaine B sto att ■■■■ Despite being with a unknown.

And I feel like, if it's a fashion, I ■■■■is, On my knees with my hands lifted high Oh God, the battle belongs to you And every fear I lay at your feet Pouncing through the night Oh God, the battle belongs to you And if you are for me, who can be against me?

[ 33 : 01 ] For Jesus, there's nothing impossible for you When all I see are the ashes You see the beauty When all I see is the cross God, you see the empty tomb So when I fight, I'll fight on my knees With my hands lifted high Oh God, the battle belongs to you And every fear I lay at your feet Pouncing through the night Oh God, the battle belongs to you An almighty fortress

You go before us Nothing can stand against the power of our God You shine in the shadow You win every battle Nothing can stand against the power of our God An almighty fortress You go before us Nothing can stand against the power of our God You shine in the shadow You win every battle Nothing can stand against the power of our God Nothing can stand against the power of our God

I fight on my knees I fight on my knees With my hands lifted high Oh God, the battle belongs to you And everything I lay at your feet I'll sing through the night Oh God, the battle belongs to you Oh God, the battle belongs to you Oh God, the battle belongs to you All right, as I say Do check out the extra time slot If that appeals And if you haven't done so already Do hit subscribe if you'd like to As that will keep you up to date

With new videos as and when they appear And we'll be back with some special sessions For Maundy Thursday and Good Friday Before coming back with an Easter Sunday session next week Till then though Let's go asking for God's blessing to rest upon us And so may we be drawn ever closer to each other and to God May we be accepting of where each of us are at But longing to be led by God to where we need to be And may the blessing of God Almighty The Father, Son and Holy Spirit May that inclusive, enfolding love rest upon us And all those who we love and live alongside Both this Easter season and forevermore Amen