

Sermon for Palm Sunday (5 April 2009)

Today – Palm Sunday - we remember Jesus arriving in the city of Jerusalem. We know what it's like when 'someone special or important' comes to town. We saw it in our own capital city of London last week. Who was the 'someone special' who came to town last week? (*Barack Obama*) News and TV showed crowds of people in the streets, waving flags, shouting and clapping and taking photos. It was a bit like the arrival of a king. But Barack Obama is a President, not a king, so he wasn't wearing a king's cloak and a crown although he had a very smart suit on and a beautiful and intelligent wife by his side. He wasn't riding a horse but he did have the biggest armour-plated limousine you could imagine – ironically nicknamed 'The Beast', and he had dozens of security agents to keep him safe.

Barack and Michelle Obama weren't the only special and important people in town last week. London welcomed 20 leaders from countries all round the world; most of them had titles such as President, Prime Minister, Chancellor, though there was one king among them – the King of Saudi Arabia. And they all had their photo taken with the Queen of England. If she'd invited them all to a state banquet at Buckingham Palace she might have worn her crown – which is what we usually think of kings and queens wearing. (*Someone puts on the golden crown.*)

So why did all these special and important people come to London? They came to talk together about the problems currently facing our world, especially money problems; they came to discuss a rescue plan not just for the 20 nations represented here this week but for all the countries and peoples of the world, and especially for poorest and weakest in our world. Will their rescue plan work? I don't know – I hope it will help, though I believe it will take far more than human ingenuity and resources to save us all.

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem people welcomed him as someone special and important in the same way. The crowds shouted and waved branches rather than flags; and they treated him just like a king even though he wasn't wearing smart clothes or riding on a splendid horse. In fact he wasn't like your usual king at all in those days. After all, he was wearing ordinary clothes and riding on a donkey. But that didn't stop people recognising that here, before their very eyes, was a strong and powerful leader – one who was worth following. Zechariah the prophet had spoken of 'a king triumphant and victorious, but humble and riding on a donkey'. And here he was, riding on 'in majesty to victory for the defence of truth and justice' just as the Psalmist had written. I'm sure there were many that day in the Jerusalem crowds who

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had seen Jesus at work in their city and the surrounding villages – healing broken hearts, setting captives free, giving hearing and sight to the deaf and the blind, and causing the lame to dance. They'd seen him bring love, peace and joy in the midst of sorrow and hardship. They had seen him come to the aid of the poor and the weak, and some had even seen him triumphant over sin and death. For the people this was really something to shout and sing about. Jesus was like a conquering hero – like someone who had beaten the opposition in a sports competition or had won a battle. In Greek and Roman times if you won a gold medal at the Olympics or won a great military victory in a war, then you would receive a crown. But it wasn't a golden crown; instead it was a laurel wreath. The gospels don't tell us if Jesus was given a laurel wreath to wear when the people of Jerusalem welcomed him as their king, but if they had, it might have been something like this one. *(Someone puts on the laurel wreath.)*

So why did Jesus enter Jerusalem in this way, allowing the crowds to vandalise the local trees and wave branches in celebration, to spread their cloaks on the road for him to ride over, to shout their praises, and to acclaim him as their king? Did he intend it to be a feel-good moment for the people at the start of the Passover week celebrations? Or was he redefining kingship for them, giving them a picture of a different sort of Messiah King to the one they'd been taught to look for? Or was Jesus purposefully acting out and fulfilling the messianic prophecy of Zechariah, in the full knowledge that in doing so he will provoke the Jewish leaders to take drastic action against him. When he enters Jerusalem in triumph on Palm Sunday Jesus sets off the chain of events that will lead up to Good Friday. This is the point at which Jesus commits himself to God's rescue plan for humankind, to God's plan of salvation – which is so much better than any plan humans can devise to solve their problems.

On Palm Sunday we see Jesus beginning the final phase of the process that is described in the letter to the Philippian church (Phil. 2.6-8) – Jesus emptying himself, taking the form of a slave, humbling himself and becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The road into Jerusalem city that on Palm Sunday is paved with cloaks and branches laid down by enthusiastic followers will in a few days' time become the road along which an innocent and persecuted man is forced to carry his cross on his way to a cruel execution. On Good Friday - the Messiah – the Son of God – the Saviour of the world – will be wearing a very different sort of crown. *(Invite someone to put on the crown of thorns.)*

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And what should be our response today? The introductory words to our service encourage us to walk with Jesus throughout this coming week in faith and love as he completes his work of salvation. Can we commit to that in the midst of our busy lives this week? It seems little enough to ask. In the end, Isaac Watts says it all in the final verse of his famous hymn:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,

That were an offering far too small:

Love so amazing, so divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all.