

Bathurst Uniting Church

Sunday 5 April, 2020 Palm Sunday

Kids' focus

Today, we remember the day when Jesus comes to the city of Jerusalem, and all the people shout and sing as if he was a *King* coming to his home city. In fact, many of them believed that Jesus was the King whom God had promised would come to them, and one day be king of the whole world...

I wonder what we think of, when we think about all the kings we've ever read or heard about... Crowns and robes, perhaps... A palace... A big throne... Lots of gold and treasure... And of course, armies: *big* armies...

Now if a king like that was coming into his city for a very important festival, I wonder what kind of transport he might use... Perhaps this? Or this?



In fact, when Jesus came into the city of Jerusalem, for the very important festival, his kingly mode of transport was... this.



Hmmm... I wonder what kind of king would come into his city on a *donkey*...

He would have to be a *very* different kind of king... Not a king with a crown or a palace, or a throne, or treasure, or armies... A king who loved people, and wanted to be close to them...

I wonder what the people of Jesus' day thought about that...

Let's find out, shall we, from our Bible reading.

Reading: Matthew 21: 1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this: ‘The LORD needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.”

This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

“Say to the daughter of Zion,
Look! Your king is coming to you,
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,
And on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

And a very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him, and that followed, were shouting,

**‘Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heavens!’**

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking: ‘Who *is* this?’

Message: Who is this?

'When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking: 'Who is this?'... Who is this, that even the wind and waves obey him; fresh from healing a man who had been born blind – reviving a man who had been dead for four days?... Who is this, the man identified by the Passover crowds as the one foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures: the Son of David, the anointed one of God, who would enter Jerusalem as its King to inaugurate God's kingdom of peace and justice on the earth at last? Who is this, the man Jesus of Nazareth, dusty and jogging along on a donkey...?

Not long before (Matthew 16:13-20), Jesus himself had asked the question, challenging his disciples to decide for themselves, on the basis of what they had seen and heard of him: 'Who do people say the Son of Man is? And you? Who do you say that I am?'

It is good to ask questions about Jesus – to think about the questions the people who knew him and saw him and heard about him had – because otherwise, on a day like today, it is all too easy to fall back on old ideas. To wave palms and sing 'Hosanna!' without knowing why we do it. To wave palms and sing 'hosanna!' because that's what churches have always done. To wave palms and sing 'hosanna!' without recognising that it is, in fact, a risky, radical, potentially world-shaking act. An answer – a risky, radical, potentially world-shaking answer – to the question: 'Who is this? Who do you say that I am?'

Jesus chose Jerusalem of all places – at this festival of all festivals, when the city was crowded with pilgrims, in a ferment of expectation. They'd heard about Jesus, seen what he'd been doing – heard the whispers: 'Only God's anointed could do these things!' It's Passover, the ancient celebration of God's intervention to free his people from slavery in Egypt – and the word is going round: 'The Messiah is coming, the rightful King of David's line, God's Chosen – to usher in a new liberation! Cry hosanna – wave the branches on the road to the temple!' Because that's how the Hebrew Scriptures portrayed this hoped-for climax of Israel's history. 'Bind the festal procession with branches going up to the altar,' cried the Psalmist. 'Sing out in celebration, God's people!', cried the prophet, 'See your King is coming to you, righteous and bringing salvation, humble and riding a donkey!'

Who is this?, ask the crowds as Jesus rides into Jerusalem. Perhaps this is *he* – the *one* – the king the Scriptures foretold, who would cast off Roman oppression and establish the rule of Israel's God in all the world!

Who is this?, ask the Jewish religious authorities. Who is this that he would allow the people to hail him as God's anointed king, Israel's Messiah?

Who is this?, ask the Roman imperial authorities. Who is this having some kind of crazy triumphal procession – when on this very day, by the opposite gate-way on the other side of the city, another procession is entering Jerusalem for the Passover festivities: the Roman Imperial governor, Pontius Pilate, is processing in with his Roman military guard in full regalia, a show of imperial power and magnificence designed to quell *exactly* this kind of religious hysteria. That's what a 'triumphal entry' is *supposed* to look like...

Riding a *donkey*... We tend to think it's a sign of Jesus' humility: after all, Zechariah had written that the king entering Jerusalem would be – counter-intuitively – 'gentle, riding a donkey'. But Jesus is not only deliberately evoking a Scripture about gentleness and humility – he is deliberately evoking a Scripture about the *true King of Israel* taking possession of his city. The Romans wouldn't mistake the message: to them, this was a flat-out rejection of Empire, a direct subversion of the powers that be. It was enough to get a man noticed. It was enough to get a man crucified...

So, *Who is this?*... Not a man enjoying a well-deserved day of acknowledgement and celebration... Not a man signalling how meek and mild he is... This is a man riding head-on, eyes wide open, toward confrontation and its consequences... A man refusing to shy away from suffering, or to change his message or his methods in order to stay safe... A man willing to die rather than stop loving, to die rather than stop forgiving, to die rather than stop offering life... In a world where pain-avoidance and the protection of our comfort zones has become almost a religion in itself, this should be deeply challenging. *Who is this?* A man willing to die in order to live God's way in the face of all the demands and threats of Empire and its systems. A man willing to die to be God's true king to the lost, and least and left behind...

So, *Who is this?* Who is Jesus Christ for us, today, wherever we are, trying to juggle physical distance and social connection; trying to cope with loneliness and frustration and a dwindling stock of toilet paper; trying to find hope and courage and strength in stories of care and heroism – against the tide of selfishness and hoarding and fear and boredom and despair... *Who is he* – what *could* he be – to us, today, wherever we are, hungering for peace; comfort; connection; meaning and purpose; healing – and hope. Above all, hungering for hope...

Who is he for us, this Jesus Christ, in a time when coronavirus is shaking our world? Whoever he is... for thousands of believers during the Great Plague, the Black Death, he was – somehow – *enough*... For believers in solitary confinement, in political prisons, in Gulags, he has – somehow – been *enough*... For millions of believers facing persecution, or struggle – or even death – he *is* – somehow – *enough*...

I was thinking about how, some years ago, when Muslim women were being harassed on buses and trains in the wake of a terrorist attack, someone coined the Twitter hashtag 'I'll ride with you'. It was a gesture of solidarity: of standing *with* someone, of standing *up* for them... So on this Palm Sunday, as we look back at the earthly ministry of Jesus, now coming towards its end; as we look at him riding his ridiculous, dangerous donkey to confrontation with the powers of selfishness and suffering, greed and injustice, perhaps we have to ask ourselves *two* questions:

Who is this – or who *could* he be for us, if we let him?
And... *will we ride with him?*