

2024 TALK, 24.3.24: JOHN 12:1-8, MATTHEW 21:8-16

(THE CHILDREN &) THOSE THAT FOLLOWED, SHOUTED...

As you know, today is Palm Sunday. So, one of today's Bible readings is all about the events of that first Palm Sunday... Earlier this week, I heard an awful confession on the lips of a fellow Baptist minister. Adrian from Potters Bar made this confession to Simon, who was formerly his senior minister. Adrian confessed to having preached at his church, about the events of Palm Sunday, **a full three weeks ago**. Something Simon would have strongly disapproved of, being a much more liturgically-minded Baptist minister ! Adrian's justification for this wayward behaviour was simple. The events of Jesus' last week on earth are so action-packed, it is impossible to fit everything in, between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. So, he brought Easter week forward into Lent & took more time with his church, to reflect on the events of Jesus' last week on earth.

I do sympathise with Adrian. But I usually take a different approach. Each year I pick out different events from Easter week, to preach on Palm Sunday, Good Friday & Easter Sunday. This way, we preserve the integrity of the waiting period of Lent & maximise opportunities in Lent to preach on events from the earlier ministry of Jesus. I do all this, assuming that we are all reading the whole background story of Easter anyway, during this time...? (Ahem...!)

Today, it's good to place two contrasting Easter week stories side by side. One is a story in a domestic setting; a story of a very personal passion expressed by one woman. The other classic 'Palm Sunday story' is very much an outdoor story involving a cast of many hundreds. A story of people's public enthusiasm for Jesus, as well as Jesus' own passion for God's house & God's people.

Let's turn to John 12. To another slightly awkward, embarrassing moment for the disciples. From Matthew's account of this same event, it is obvious that it's not just Judas who is made to feel uncomfortable by the extravagance & sensuality of the love Mary expresses for Jesus. But their objections are quickly rebuked by Jesus, because she has done: 'a beautiful thing'.

I can't help thinking that what is happening here is similar to someone throwing a party for someone else, ahead of their funeral, to celebrate that person's life - with them being present. What Mary has done is recognised here as anticipating Jesus' death & burial. But at the same time, it is very much a celebration of the richness & fullness & fruitfulness of the life of Jesus. We are

told that the house was filled with this wonderful, inescapable sweet smell. Forget Hugo Boss or Christian Dior... The enduring fragrance of this precious gloom would have stayed with Jesus throughout his last days on earth. An encouraging reminder to him through those dark hours on the cross. An intriguing & silent response to the question of the crowds in Jerusalem: 'Who is this?'. This is the Lover from the Song of Songs, dripping with the finest spices & the dew of the morning. The one who potently & patently smells of love...

At the start of his ministry Jesus declares something like this: 'The LORD has anointed me to share good news & to announce freedom for humanity & all creation'. Does Jesus need any further anointing, if he has been so clearly anointed by God? But **then, during** his ministry & **right at the end** of his ministry, Jesus also, poignantly & pointedly, accepts other, more mundane anointings. Who does he allow himself to be anointed by? Was this by a high priest?... or someone else in authority? No! Jesus is anointed by 'ordinary' & sinful people like you & I. More significantly, Jesus is anointed by women - people with little or no standing in society at that time.

I don't think it is an overstatement to say that this very fact, shows us as much about the nature of Jesus' mission as anything else. It's not just about the amazing things he does for others, but it's about the 'beautiful things' he allows people to do for him... That's God grace for you. Allowing others the space & time to express their love for God - whether it's through 2 copper coins, 5 loaves & 2 fish, or half a litre of that expensive stuff - pure nard.

What a uniquely divine combination. That the King of Kings & the hope of all the nations should be so lowly & humble of heart to warmly welcome **my** love & **your** love. Broken & incomplete though our love is...

Jesus had & still today has a peculiar ministry to the 'little people' of the earth. He is a 'defender of the defenceless'. So, he defends Mary from these loud objections to such 'wastefulness'. In a similar way, he defends the children shouting in the Temple, from the indignation of the chief priests & the teachers of the law. What is ironic here, is that the praise from the lips of the children is more truthful than the confession of the crowds, who declare Jesus to be 'a prophet'. The children though, have it right: 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' they shout. They have identified, much to the authorities' horror, that Jesus is indeed Israel's & the world's true King.

We must never forget how prominent children & young people are in the story of Jesus. Those routinely overlooked in a world centred on the important, the famous & the infamous. A world built by & for clever & capable adults. It's into this world that Jesus comes as servant of all & as someone who overturns 'business as usual'. Jesus goes so far as to place a child at the centre of his mission, as an example to all his adult followers. 'Unless you become like one of these, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God'...

Over the coming weeks, Carey will begin to consider again our Children's, Youth & Families work – & how we (with God's help) are going to fund it in future. I encourage you to pray about this. To seek the face of the One who welcomed little children with such joyful abandon. To remind yourselves of how much children (and other 'little people') were front & centre of Jesus' mission – both by 'accident' & by design. Too often children & young people are treated by churches as a bit of an afterthought. We sort out the church's ministry to the adults first, then we think about the children & young people. Well, according to the ministry of Jesus, this is a wrong order of priority. Food for thought & prayer in the coming weeks, I hope - ahead of our Extraordinary Church Meeting next month about our Children's, Youth & Families work.

Well, to conclude. As we begin Easter week, these stories from the gospels of John & Matthew, throw up some searching questions for us. Putting it very baldly, two of these questions are: 'What do we value most?' And, 'How much do we love Jesus?'. But there are many other challenges which Mary's devotion & the children's excitement present us with.

This Easter, how we will show our personal devotion & our public witness to the 'Son of David' ? Are we going to pour out what is most precious to us upon the feet of Jesus?... Because if we do this, we will personally experience our homes, our church, our community being filled with the fragrance of the love of Jesus... Are we going to shout, at the top of our lungs, & make public our excitement about Jesus ? No doubt there are many ways in which we can declare our passion for Jesus, both personally & publicly... We are indeed coming back to 'the heart of worship'. We express our love for Jesus, because Jesus first loved us & gave himself to us & the world, as a sacrifice for our sin.

In the words of a song, centred on the Last Supper: 'Oh what a gift, what a wonderful gift, who can tell the wonders of the LORD? Let us open our eyes, our ears & our hearts, it is Christ the LORD it is He!'... Thanks be to God !

(READ: George Herbert poem – Love III, p.245 Oxford Poetry vol 1 ?)