

Palm Sunday 4th April 2004 Ballyclare

If you had been there that first Palm Sunday I'm sure you would have found it difficult to describe to your friends exactly what had taken place. "What was it like?" they would ask you, and you could say, "some of it looked like a great celebration, some of it like a wild party, there were moments when you thought a great rebellion was about to take place and at times it seemed like it was the start of a glorious coronation ceremony!"

But then you would have to tell them about the other aspects of that strange day. "There were times," you would say, "when it looked as though Jesus wasn't going to make it. He broke down in tears as he approached Jerusalem and amidst all the shouting of the crowd, as they yelled 'God save the king!' at the top of their voices, there sat Jesus, alone among a thousand people, his eyes red with crying, his beard wet with tears.

The Roman soldiers must have been nervous and on edge that day, after all this was Passover, the Jewish Independence Day, Easter Uprising Commemoration, and Twelfth of July rolled into one, during which they celebrated that day long ago in which God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. It didn't take a genius to work out that the Jews looked upon the Romans as the modern day equivalent of the Egyptians and prayed that God would send another Moses to rid them of this new form of slavery.

And so these young soldiers must have looked as nervous as those young soldiers you see peering out of Personnel Carriers standing at checkpoints in Baghdad or Basra. The tension was thick in the air. At this time of year, from their point of view, every religious nut and political fanatic in the land was

converging on Jerusalem and so the sight of this man arriving on a donkey, with what must have been hundreds of fairly rough looking men and the crowd shouting his name as though he had already been made king would have made them wonder if they were going to get through today without blood being shed.

All these cries of “God save the King!” were getting the Pharisees nervous too, they had read their Bibles, and they knew that quote from Zechariah that we heard at the start of the service. Turning up at Jerusalem before Passover riding a colt was not only a deliberate fulfilment of prophecy but also a declaration of Kingship.

9 Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

10 I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

They are nervous because, like the Romans, they are afraid of what Jesus will do once he gets into the city, and, if he tries to make himself king by force, then they are afraid of what the Roman army will do in response. So they ask Jesus to silence the crowds, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” They say in Luke’s Gospel; but there is no stopping the crowd that has built up around Jesus. His response to the Pharisees is deliberately provocative; he lets them know that in order to stop this happening they are going to have to stop him.

The royal entourage enters Jerusalem and not too long after entering there is a moment of crisis, apparently the route Jesus took comes to a fork in the road. One road goes to the headquarters of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem, the other leads to the temple. To choose the garrison road would have been an open declaration of war and that's what many in the crowd would have wanted.

The Zealots would have been there in force, once before they had wanted to make Jesus king after the feeding of the 5000 but he had refused. Who knows? "Maybe," they thought, "This Jesus has become as sick of the Romans as we are and he's decided that it is time to do something."

All of these different groups and each of them had their own expectations of Jesus. I think we can say for certain that there were two things that no-one in Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday expected to happen over the next few days leading up to Passover. Firstly no-one expected nothing to happen. There was no room for apathy in people's reactions to Jesus. Everyone had heard about the things he had done and the things he had said, everyone had an opinion on him, whether they hated him or they loved him, no-one expected the next few days to be boring.

The second thing they did not expect was the very thing that Jesus had come to do. No one would have believed that he came to Jerusalem deliberately to die. His disciples had been told this time and again but even they did not understand. In Mark 9:31-32 Jesus tells his disciples, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But verse 32 says "They did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."

What do you expect of Jesus this Easter? Do you expect anything? Easter seems to have snuck up on me this year, in fact it seems like it has been no time at all since that Sunday just after Easter when I first came here as Student Assistant but now here we are at the start of Holy Week and soon it will be Good Friday when we remember and celebrate the terrible lengths that God went to in order that we might be reconciled to him.

What do you expect from Jesus this Easter? Holy Week is a time not only for remembering but also a time for renewing our relationship with Jesus. A week in which we get to focus on those last few days of his earthly ministry and in which we get to look again at the cross and all that God has done for us.

The events of Palm Sunday only really make sense when they are seen in the light of the events of Good Friday. It is only when we see the full extent of both God's righteous anger and God's merciful love on the cross that we can begin to understand the strange ways in which Jesus behaved that day.

First of all we are going to look at God's merciful love because the cross is, first and foremost, an act of mercy unparalleled in the history of the world. In fact it is THE act of mercy from which all others find their definition. There are a great many pictures that the New Testament writers use to describe for us what occurred that day on the cross. They talk of cancelling a debt that could not be paid or setting free a prisoner, giving freedom to a slave, all of which tell us about the mercy that lies at the very heart of what Jesus set out to do.

That mercy and love bursts forth in tears as Jesus laments over Jerusalem, it shows itself physically as he weeps for the city and the people who have rejected both him and his love time and time again. Even though the city of Jerusalem stands for all that is faithless and coldly, narrowly religious in Jewish society, still Jesus loves it.

Luke's Gospel records one other time when he wept over Jerusalem and in that picture Jesus compares himself to a mother hen, this is Luke 13, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Does Jesus weep over Ballyclare in the way that he wept over Jerusalem? Does he look at the churches in this town, and, instead of seeing faithful people united in love for him does he see an apathetic church, that expects nothing from God? God's love for us demands a response; he doesn't tolerate the kind of so-so indifference that we are so good at cultivating as Presbyterians. God is never half hearted towards us; we should never be half hearted towards him.

The love of God for us is strong, stronger than the hatred of the city that killed the prophets and stoned those sent to it, stronger than all of our failings and our wrongdoings, stronger even than the natural rebellion in our hearts as sinful people. God's love for us was so strong that it drove him to the cross. Jesus entered Jerusalem that day with all of the pomp and dignity that would accompany the arrival of a king but he was a king who came to be crowned not with Gold or precious jewels but

with thorns. He came not to sit upon a golden throne but to be enthroned upon a criminal's cross, where he would die for the love that he has for you and for me.

But we must be careful when we speak of the love of God that we do not make it out to be merely a weak love that does not have room for righteous anger. God demonstrated to us on the cross not only the depths of his love for us but also the full extent of our sin and its consequences. On the cross that day Jesus bore what we could never bear: the righteous anger of God. An anger that we see in Jesus cleansing of the temple.

This anger of God comes from no lesser source than his love and it is because of that love that the next day Jesus takes charge of the cleansing of the temple. It is an act of righteous anger but it is also an act of love. The courtyard of the temple in which this action takes place was originally set aside as an area in which gentiles from all over the world could come to worship God but it soon became a place in which the regulations of the temple and its sacrifices became twisted to fill the greedy pockets of men and women who saw God only as a useful means of making money.

The dealers and the money changers in the temple made their money out of two main regulations for temple worship. The first regulation was that the annual tax that every Jew had to pay for the upkeep of the temple could only be paid in either special temple money or in the money of Galilee. It would be the equivalent of telling people that they could only pay their church offering in either specially printed church money or in Bank of Scotland fivers. Local money would not do.

These money changers were the equivalent of someone sitting at the door of the church and charging people for the privilege

of changing their own everyday money to money that was acceptable to give to God. Their charges could be extortionate and of course it was the poor who were hurt most as they could least afford to pay.

The other means they had of making money out of people was by selling them animals that met the rigorous standards of purity for temple sacrifice. You could bring your own animals to the temple for sacrifice but they had to be checked over thoroughly and if any spot or blemish was found on the animal then it could not be offered. This was temporarily good news for the animal but not good news for the person who spent good money on it.

One way to ensure that your animal would always be accepted would be to buy it from a dealer within the grounds of the temple itself, the catch being that you could pay up to fifteen times as much for an animal within the temple as you could for one outside of it. The impression is given that the inspectors of animals seemed to be getting a cut of the profits of the dealers and so it was in their favour to turn down people's animals. Again it was the poor who were most effected by this while the temple officials became richer by the hour.

Jesus love for the poor boiled up into righteous anger and then into action. John tells us that he put together a whip of cords with which to drive out these thieves from the house of God. Jesus drove the money changers out with an anger and a ferocity such as only comes from one who loved deeply those who were being ripped off blasphemously in the name of God.

Jesus calls us today to burn with that same anger and that same love. A love that weeps for the sin that held Jesus to the cross stronger than any nail. A love that throws off the apathy that tells us lies like, “You don’t want to take this religious nonsense to seriously you know...” a love that dares to speak the name of Jesus as master and lord. A love that yearns to see others changed and lives transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. Do we long for that sort of love? Do we long for the anger that goes along with it.

An anger that refuses to compromise with sin. A passion that leaves no room for the apathy that destroys the effectiveness of many a Christian in this land. A righteous anger that will not stand by and let inequality or injustice go unchecked in our society, in our country, and in our churches. But such a passionate love and such a passionate anger frightens us because we know that having it will involve not only the triumph of Easter Sunday but also the tears of Good Friday.

Let us pray that this Palm Sunday God will grant us some of the love shown by Jesus on that first Palm Sunday many years ago and not only today but throughout this Easter time and for the rest of our days here on Earth.

Amen