



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church Palm Sunday, March 20, 2016

Luke 19: 29-40

The issue behind the story of Jesus entry procession into Jerusalem is expectations. What were the expectations in Judea at that time? What were the expectations of Jesus followers? What were the expectations of the people in Jerusalem? And what are our expectations when we read this story? We expect to see a great crowd, stirred up with praise for this miracle working preacher and prophet, all crying out “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” Whereas, scholars will say that it could have been nothing more than an enlarged group of disciples of Jesus in the midst of the large crowd of people entering Jerusalem for Passover. All the people would have been shouting and singing Hallel Psalms, like 118 – Open the gates, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – and waving palm branches as a symbol of victory and rejoicing. It is only on reflection that the disciples saw the extra significance that Jesus had added with the donkey and the cloaks. Expectations can colour our understanding; just as expectations coloured the understanding of all those present on that day when Jesus organised for a donkey to ride into Jerusalem.

Those disciples joining in the cries of Hosanna and Blessing would have had a different expectation of Jesus and what was happening than Jesus did. The two disciples walking to Emmaus after the crucifixion summed it up; “We hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel”. They expected some great display of power that would free Israel from the Romans; “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” The parable just before this story is told because, Luke tells us, people had built up expectations that the kingdom was to appear immediately. Instead, Jesus is sent to the cross. Their expectation coloured their understanding.

Some in Jesus party – including possibly Judas – were expecting a revolutionary leader; “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord”. Someone who would whip up the crowds to revolution. They expected something from Jesus that he had never displayed and yet that expectation still coloured their understanding.

The Pharisees expected that their approach to Law and purity would bring the people back to God. They weren’t telling Jesus to stop his disciples from praising God, they wanted him to stop them making the praise about Jesus. Their expectations stopped them from seeing that the praise should be about Jesus.

Others in the disciples were praising God for what they had received or seen and expected more of the same from Jesus. Luke, and Mark and Matthew, record the healing of a blind man before this entry into Jerusalem. John tells us that many in that crowd were there because they had heard about the healing of Lazarus. An expectation of the outpouring of health and healing led them to praise but instead, Jesus does a lot of teaching in the temple and then goes to the cross. Another expectation that colours understanding.

All of that is important in understanding what is happening in this story because, as I said, what is our expectation of Jesus. As we come to the high festival of Easter, who are we welcoming this Palm Sunday? What is our expectation of Jesus? It is important because it doesn't just colour our understanding of Easter, it colours our whole walk in faith with Jesus through our lives.

How you live your life depends on which set of expectations you see Jesus through; this is not just about the people of Judea and Jerusalem 2000 years ago, this is about your welcome of Jesus into your life.

Many expect the Jesus of the triumphal entry, that everyone praises Jesus as Lord. Like the Philippians hymn; "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord". They expect Christendom; pews are full and everyone knows and respects the Christian faith. That expectation falls fat when they feel that the world is more like Good Friday and Jesus is rejected and discarded. Instead, see the Jesus of the small demonstration, the Jesus of the fringe and the fringe dwellers, the poor, the broken and the outcasts. The Jesus who calls for faith, not popularity.

The current election cycle in America, and that rising tide here in Australia, shows that many want the Jesus of political and cultural power. All the candidates in America want the blessing of the evangelical churches; they expect the Jesus of right and righteousness, of morality and conservative values. However, that expectation is the one of the Pharisees, and it clashes with the real world of suffering and need. Instead see the Jesus of compassion, the one who calls for the plank to be taken out of your eye and challenges those who judge to look firstly at themselves.

Some expect the Jesus of health and prosperity, the Son of God who is supposed to be like a genie in a lamp. I confess Jesus as Lord, I pray and good things happen. That expectation comes crashing to the ground at the first sign of illness, grief or struggle. Instead, see the Jesus who suffered and who joins us in our suffering to supply strength for the ordeal; the Jesus who calls for faith in strife and not faith to avoid strife. When Jesus taught us to pray, "save us from the time of trial", he was talking about persecution and not the complexities of living.

And some expect the Jesus of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. “Christ you know I love you, did you see I waved? I believe in you and God, now tell me I am saved.” The buddy Jesus who sits on the car dashboard as a religious talisman but doesn’t threaten or demand. The gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who loves and forgives and accepts us as we are. The Jesus as optional extra to living our life. That expectation doesn’t want to see the cross, or hear the call to take up the cross; it doesn’t understand that this is serious, life giving and life changing stuff. Instead see the Jesus who struggles and suffers and dies because that’s how important it is to God for us to open ourselves to love.

This is a day of great celebration when we welcome Jesus as he enters the city, but it’s a welcome that needs to be seen in the light of the cross and the tomb and not just in the light of processions and acclamations. From our point of view we are welcoming the one who is walking to the cross, the one who will be king on the other side of suffering and death, the one who answers prayer in accordance with the will of God. Instead of expectations of glory, power, respectability or prosperity, let us welcome the one who invites us to join the procession and take up our cross in this piece of street theatre that lampoons all the kings and warriors and power brokers. Welcome the Christ of the cross who comes in the name of the Lord of life and love.