

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Palm Sunday 2011 –Continuing the Story.
Matthew 21.12-17

I asked Christine to read the Gospel passage we've just heard, after we'd gone over the story of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the children, because I think it's sometimes easy to see different incidents in Jesus' life in isolation from each other – because that's how we hear them read about in church.

Of course, we all know that the story of Palm Sunday leads into Holy Week, and that by the end of the week there will be a crowd not crying 'Hosanna to the Son of David!', but 'Crucify him!'. So we're familiar with the sense in which today's story is part of an emotional roller-coaster ride – the highest high in the story leading to the lowest low with almost dizzying speed.

But I also want to say a few words about another contrast, which is brought out by hearing how the Palm Sunday story of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem carries on: It's the contrast between Jesus' humility and the way in which he symbolised a peaceful kingdom, by coming in on a donkey, and, on the other hand, his rage and assertiveness – his activity as a judge, indeed, in entering the Temple and turning over the seats and tables, sending money spinning, birds fluttering, and possibly also other sacrificial animals stampeding through the Temple courts.

The church has traditionally made a great deal of Christ's humility, and our collect prayed that we might emulate it; but it was a particular kind of humility which didn't display itself in weakness, or in Jesus apologising for himself – far from it! It was a humility towards God – indeed, as we believe, the humility *of* God himself, in stooping to embrace our humanity, even unto death; but it was not a not a humility towards those who were corrupting religion and making it their power-base.

Palm Sunday, according to Matthew, began for Jesus a week of sharp disputes and conflicts –provoked by him, in the cause of the holiness and compassion of God. Where holiness had been interpreted by the narrow canons of ritual purity, so that the impoverished, the 'unclean', the disabled, the noisy children were excluded from the sacred place, Christ brought those people right in, in furtherance of his message that such are at the centre of God's holy purposes. And he also, unapologetically during this week, insisted that God's purposes found their focus and fulfilment in himself. This is partly what led to the angry cries for his blood at the end of the week, the charge of blasphemy, and the cruel death.

As his followers Christians should pray for humility – certainly. But the right kind of humility. Humility towards God, but coupled with courage to speak up in the world, not to retreat into some kind of lily-livered meekness. To speak up for Jesus, and to speak up for the kind of holy love he embodied, -which takes the part of the least regarded and most despised against

the self-interest of the powerful, and maybe of the majority. Sometimes taking the side of the weakest and most marginalised even means taking sides against our *own* self-interest.

So, Palm Sunday challenges us in the matter of our courage.

I'd also now like to say a few words about the significance of the Temple in the story of Jesus' passion. And to do that, I'd like you to think about the role of St Paul's Cathedral in the City of London. You could say that its familiar dome is the emblem of the city; we certainly know how much it's much loved. During the Blitz there were special fire-watchers detailed to the cathedral, because it was such an important building for the nation, and after the war there was much rejoicing that that great dome had escaped largely unscathed, while all around it had been the smoke of destruction.

Part of St Paul's value for us is the knowledge that Christopher Wren's great design rose like a Phoenix out of the destruction of a former conflagration – the Great Fire of London in 1666. So, in that sense, St Paul's as we know it now, stands for the human spirit rising above tragedy to make something new.

Well, the Temple in Jerusalem was something like that – only more, much more – for the Jewish people. Twice destroyed, and now, in Jesus' day, being rebuilt by public subscription to the grandiose plan of King Herod, it stood not only for God's presence in their

midst, but also for the indomitability of the Jewish people and their faith – despite centuries of being vassals to different great powers as they rose and fell.

You can understand then why attacks on the Temple by one of their own seemed so outrageous – and in a certain way, Jesus' action in 'cleansing' it was an attack, even though he valued it enough to worship there himself, and to teach in its courts. But, more than that, there was the fact that he prophesied the Temple's downfall; of this I'm quite sure. Matthew and Mark's Gospels unite in saying that the accusations brought against him related to 'destroying the Temple', and St John, too, records the enigmatic saying '*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*' (John 2.19), which he interprets as a reference not to the Jerusalem temple, but to that of our Lord's own body. I doubt that Jesus said he would personally destroy the temple, but there's plenty of evidence that he prophesied that this doom was on its way (which, of course, happened in AD 70 when the Romans came and razed it almost to the ground).

So, as much as Palm Sunday challenges us in the matter of courage, it also challenges us in the matter of how much we value the dearest and most precious of our material things and places: they can certainly point us to God, if viewed and used aright, but do they sometimes stand in the way of God, or matter to us more than he does? Could we imagine 'being the church' if there was no church for us to come to, only mundane rooms to meet in, which did nothing to inspire us?

'God is Spirit' says Jesus in St John's Gospel, *'and those who worship him must worship him in Spirit and in Truth'* (John 4.24).

To truth we must add courage, as well as humility before God, and a willingness to let go of even precious things and places. Holding these qualities within us at the same time – truth, courage, humility, and willingness to let go - is our Christian calling – the calling to walk the way of the cross.