

Palm Sunday 5th April 2009.

Readings: Mark 11 vv 1 – 11 p 1016
Zechariah 9 vv 9 – 12 p955

There can't be anyone here who was not aware of the G20 meeting held here in London last week, when perhaps the most powerful man in the world came into London, which for a few days was the centre of the world's attention; and a world in some high degree of chaos. And also of the noisy crowd that greeted this most powerful man.

There clearly are so many strong parallels between the world this week and what we heard in our two readings this morning from Zechariah and Mark. Here the man who was to become the most powerful man in the world came into the city that then was the centre of the known world's attention, equally in a state of chaos and also led by a noisy crowd. On the face of it there were so many superficial similarities, but deep under the differences are huge. Let's take a look at these similarities and differences.

Similarities:

- Powerful men entering the cities that are and were the centre of world attention.
- A world in strife – the land of Judea described by Zechariah was in constant conflict. Its leaders with closed minds: Z ch 7 v11 "But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets". Sounds familiar?
- Our world today is suffering one of its greatest financial crises ever, brought on by man's stubbornness, arrogance and greed for money (remember: the love of money is the root of all evil)
- Once in Jerusalem, Jesus went to the temple where he turned over the money changers' tables in disgust at their corrupt ways. The public's contempt for bankers today is comparable.
- Jesus entered Jerusalem for the Passover, which this year occurs on this coming Thursday.

But the differences are more marked:

- Jesus entered the city in humility riding a donkey – Mr Obama has to enter in an armoured limousine amidst a cavalcade of vehicles (though I suspect at heart he might prefer the more simple approach.)
- The crowd with Jesus wanted him to be their religious leader – the G20 crowd were angry protestors and sadly some were outright trouble makers.
- Mr Obama may be the most powerful man in the world today, but in years to come he will be largely forgotten, whereas Jesus will always be unchanged.

With this in mind, the question I want to answer is what is the relevance of Palm Sunday to us in Aldham today and also to the world at large?

Whenever I prepare a talk here in Aldham, the questions I always keep coming back to are how can I put what we have heard in our readings into context, what is the relevance to us and most of all, why? The last question is always the simplest to ask and the most difficult to answer; but once answered, really provides real understanding. This is what we all should be seeking.

Let's start at the beginning. Zechariah is a real visionary and prophet living in a time when Jerusalem was a deeply troubled city (and little changed from either the time of Jesus to the mess it is in today.) Most significantly he saw God coming to return order to the people of Judea, and as in v9: Rejoice greatly ... See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt...

Mark's gospel reiterates this in such a similar way – equally it is more than likely that Jesus was well aware of this. Quote ch11, v1,2 . His entry into Jerusalem was joyous (read vv7 – 10). This as we know is the beginning of the end for Jesus as a mortal, but **why** did it happen like this? What was behind it all; it certainly wasn't accidental. (*Problem with disjointed nature of so many Bible stories.*)

For our answer one has to read further, and specifically John in his gospel relates what we need to know. At the beginning of the Mark reading, we heard that Jesus and his disciples came into the villages of Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives – but what is the significance of this? Prior to this, John tells us that Jesus had been called to Bethany by Mary and Martha on account of the death of their brother Lazarus. It was on this occasion that Jesus was so moved by Mary's grief that he went to the cave where Lazarus was laid, had the stone removed and commanded Lazarus to come out, even though he had been reportedly dead for four days.

This miracle had a great affect on the crowd, but with two results. Firstly many now saw Jesus as a great holy man (but not necessarily yet the son of God) and wanted to follow him, but others were troubled and reported back to the Pharisees and Chief Priests in Jerusalem who called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. The outcome of this was that they plotted to have Jesus killed. John again ch11 vv50 – 52 reported Caiaphas' summary of the meeting: "You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" You can now see the fear and mind-set of the religious leaders, but there is more than a touch of irony here, which John again picks up on (and we should not miss) "... he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one." At this point there was a price on Jesus' head.

The disciples became aware of this, and so they took Jesus out into the remote region of Ephraim near the desert. It was only because of the occasion of the Passover that Jesus had to come back to Jerusalem for the ceremonial cleansing, and naturally enough He stopped over at Bethany on his way. (*Describe the Edward Lear painting of the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem.*) Understandably, following Lazarus's miracle, the people of Bethany, and surrounding villages, were ecstatic to see Jesus, and hence the nature of the crowd that accompanied him into Jerusalem for the Passover. And it is now that the plots of the Chief Priest Caiaphas and the Pharisees start to come into action. The rest is the story of Easter.

So this has now sorted out the facts, but the understanding and relevance of the event is still to come. We live in a world as dysfunctional in so many ways today as that in both Zechariah's and Jesus' time. And today, men's minds are so often as closed as those reported by Zechariah, but also the Pharisees and also, surprisingly, the disciples too. When Jesus told them what was about to happen to him, their minds were closed and they could not see it. And would we be any different today? I doubt it, and that's the most worrying aspect. We cannot see what is about to happen; but at least we now know and understand the past, and also know equally that human nature doesn't change. This is a bit of a paradox. Why are so many of us blind to what is so clearly there?

So as Jesus was at the gates of Jerusalem, we are at the gates of Holy Week and the rest of our lives ahead. Let us take this opportunity to right wrongs, bond closer with our relations, friends and neighbours and open our eyes and ears to all those messages from God, not all ones that we may wish to hear. In short, to enact God's most simple and basic wishes.