

Palm Sunday

Sunday 05 April 2009

Brian Senior

Readings:

Psalm 118:1-2 & 19-24

Mark 11:1-11

Sermon

"This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24)

These are the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 118 – a great cry of praise and thanks to God for all the good things which he has done ... for his goodness, for his love, and for his saving work in our lives.

The Psalmist talks about opening up the gates so that he may go in and give thanks to the Lord ... the gates through which the righteous may enter ... and he would almost certainly have had in mind the gates of Jerusalem, through which the people would enter the city on their way to the Temple to worship God.

On the great religious feast-days, the people would come from all over Israel to worship God in his temple. This would be so much more than a trip to Church. There would be many thousands of them, and the narrow streets of the city would be crowded with people.

Whole villages would set off with food for the journey and travel to Jerusalem together, stopping to camp on the way ... families and friends who didn't see one another from one year to the next would meet up and share news of births and deaths and marriages. It was like a great holiday, and they would be days of great rejoicing and celebration.

Perhaps we have something to learn there about how we think of coming to worship God. They had a great sense of the privilege of meeting with God in his Temple ... it was something they looked forward to and prepared for ... with a real sense of occasion.

It was approaching one of the great feast days when Jesus rode into Jerusalem. It would soon be the feast of the Passover, when the Jews remembered how God had rescued them when they were slaves in Egypt, hundreds of years before.

The Jews hadn't started as slaves in Egypt. They first went there during the time of Joseph – the one with eleven brothers – who had been sold by his jealous brothers but ended up as Prime Minister of Egypt. When a famine came, the brothers went to Egypt to buy food, and found that Joseph was now in charge ... and he invited them all to come to Egypt to live under his protection.

But the time came when the Jews had grown in number, and the Egyptians forgot about Joseph and decided the Jews would make useful slaves. For many years they

worked hard for the Egyptians, making bricks and building cities, until God decided to step in.

God sent Moses to tell Pharaoh the King to let his people go, but Pharaoh refused. Eventually, because the Egyptians refused to let God's people go, despite many warnings, God said that he would take drastic action. He would send the Angel of Death to kill the first-born son of every Egyptian household – as a punishment for their cruelty, their disobedience and sin, and as a final push to make them free the slaves.

God gave his servant Moses instructions for the Israelites ... that the people should kill a Lamb for their evening meal, and put some of the blood on the doorposts of their houses as a sign, so that the Angel of Death would Pass Over their houses, and their sons would not die.

So that night, the people ate their meal with their bags packed and their sandals on their feet, ready to leave ... and God did what he said he would do. When the Egyptians realised what had happened, they told the Israelite slaves to go ... and the people left Egypt in freedom, and set off for the Promised Land.

God told them that they were to remember this night for ever – and celebrate it as the Passover Festival, because on that night the Angel of Death had Passed Over their houses, their sons had not died, and because God had saved them from the Egyptians.

So ... it was nearly Passover ... and Jesus and his disciples were heading for Jerusalem. The city was crowded with people coming for the week of festivities. The roads were busy. The people were excited ...

... and Jesus arrived! But what an arrival!

Jesus usually walked. He didn't announce that he was coming. He didn't make a fuss.

Often, when people got to hear that Jesus was in town, huge crowds would gather from somewhere. Sometimes, when he was in Galilee, people had come a very long way to see him. They came to hear his stories, or listen to his teaching. They brought their sick friends and relatives to him so that he could heal them.

Jesus wasn't in to big announcements or grand gestures ... but today was different.

The time had come to go public – to make a fuss. Jesus was announcing his arrival!

So, in your imagination, picture Jesus and his band of disciples as they approach Jerusalem, by way of Bethany, over the Mount of Olives. It is a hot and dusty road. The sun is beating down. There is a great sense of expectancy. What is going to happen?

Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead of the rest, to secure the use of a colt, and they found things just as Jesus had told them. The people asked why they were untying the colt, and the disciples answered:

"Because the Lord needs it, and will send it back here shortly."

How did Jesus know the donkey was there .. or that they would be able to use it? Had Jesus made arrangements ahead of time ... or was it just that Jesus knew, as he knew many things which other people didn't know? The important thing is that God's plan was all working out as he had chosen. All the pieces were falling onto place.

So the colt was brought to Jesus, and saddled with disciples' cloaks, and Jesus sat on it.

The final stage of the journey was beginning ... a journey which began three years before in the Jordan River, when Jesus was baptised by John, and God spoke from heaven:

"You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11)

But there was no word from the Father on this occasion. Jesus had known from the beginning that this part of the plan was down to him alone. Everything depended on him.

But what was the plan? What was this all about?

Well, it was no coincidence that Jesus was coming to town at Passover ... the celebration of God's great rescue ... because Jesus was coming in order to carry out the ultimate rescue. He was coming to save his people.

The big question was ... what was he coming to save them from?

Many of the people thought he was coming to save them from the Romans. The Roman Empire had invaded the Holy Land many years before, and Roman Rule was cruel and oppressive. They taxed the people heavily ... they treated them badly ... and they crucified anyone who stood against them or broke their rules.

The people were desperate to get rid of the Romans. They longed for freedom as their ancestors had longed for freedom from slavery in Egypt. What they wanted was a king to lead them ... someone who would bring them together and help them to stand up and fight.

So the crowds were more than willing to welcome Jesus as their coming king. For now it seemed as though they would have followed him anywhere – death or glory. Given half a chance, they would put him on the throne of Israel to conquer the occupying forces of Rome. They were ready for the coming Kingdom ...

... except Jesus had never talked about the Kingdom in terms of military might. He had always spoken of the Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God, in very different terms ... as a seed growing in the ground, which sprouts and grows until it becomes a fruitful harvest ... or as a pearl of great price, which is worth giving up everything else to gain.

Even his closest disciples, despite all he had told them about what would happen in Jerusalem, were still taken in by the great arrival party ... the enthusiasm of the crowds ... the palm-branch waving ... the shouts of "Hosanna!" and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

But Jesus knew that the Kingdom of God would not come by earthly power or by taking up arms ... but only through costly sacrifice. He had not come to be a Warrior King ... but a King of Love. He had come not to save his people from Egyptian or Roman oppression, but to save them from the oppression of sin - and to bring in the Kingdom of God.

How strange it must have been for Jesus, knowing what was to come. He rode into Jerusalem knowing that he was riding to suffering and death, and that the cries of "Hosanna!" would soon change to cries of "Crucify!" ... and yet he rode on into the city.

Just a few days later, as he struggled in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, he would have to make the final decision to go through with the plan. He knew the cost would be terrible. His disciples, despite all their promises, would fail him. Many would desert him ... Peter would deny him ... and Judas would betray him.

As we begin this Holy Week ... let us be ready to journey with Jesus in his suffering ... to think about all that it cost him to save us ... and be thankful.