Sermon for Palm Sunday 2017 St.Margaret's, Lee

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Jesus never entered any city except the city of Jerusalem. He was from the peasant class and he preached among the peasants of Galilee. About 90% of the population was rural and poor, and rural and exploited – exploited by the ruling classes who lived in the cities. He addressed the circumstances of the rural poor by proclaiming what he called the Kingdom of God. Whatever was meant by it, it took him to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the place of Jewish Passover and the place of confrontation with ruling political and religious authorities.

The Kingdom of God was, in strict sense of the term, a revolutionary idea, for it pointed to a wholly different system under which people might live their lives. It was about the dream of God, which had been quintessentially promoted by Israel's past prophets, of a realm of justice and peace, of healing and being fed, of the ending of selfish evil by the powerful and wealthy, of people feeling as though they mattered. In the name of God's dream, Jesus entered the city.

He entered the city powerless on a donkey. He was an outsider from the peasant countryside, from the class below the Just About Managing class. In opposition to the Jesus procession there was the Roman procession. This happened every year at Passover time and was led by the Roman Governor, who entered the city at the head of a column of imperial cavalry. He too was an outsider, but now from the ruling occupying imperial class. He was there to 'keep the peace'.

Imagine that imperial procession's arrival in the city. What would you see? A visual display of power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles. And what would you hear? The marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the beating of drums, the shouting of commands.

What about that other peasant procession? What would you see there? A small band of people causing a slight commotion. Perhaps a scene of excitement. Not golden eagles on poles but palm branches in human hands. A donkey with a peasant preacher sat on it. And what would you hear? Shouts of Hosanna – Hurrah! Celebratory shouts, tinged with expectations.

What does this contrast between an imperial procession and a peasant procession amount to? The Jesus of the Gospels sums it up long before it was made visible on what we call Palm Sunday:

'You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.'

This was the freedom vision of the Kingdom of God. It signalled freedom <u>from</u> subjugation but also freedom <u>for</u> a new kind of arrangement for living. If you substituted the shout of 'Freedom' for 'Hosanna' you would not be far wrong.

'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.' Shouted in the name of freedom. What were those Jews who hailed Jesus coming in to the holy city imagining? Was this theatre for theatre's sake or was there a greater reason for it? Someone gave me an interesting book the other day entitled 'Faith in the Face of Empire' – published in 2014 by a Palestinian Christian professor, reflecting on the continuous occupation of Palestine by different subjugators for over at least 2,500 years. He says this about life under occupation:

'When occupied people face the empire, they generally become so overwhelmed by its power that they start to think that the empire will remain for ever and that it has eternal power. Jesus wanted to tell his people that the empire would not last, that empires come and go.'

But there is more to understand – he continues further in the book:

'It wasn't enough for Jesus to know or believe that the [Roman] empire was not in Palestine to stay. That would have been a passive faith. For Jesus, it was imperative that faith was also active in dismantling the empire. Resistance becomes an act of faith.'

The entry into Jerusalem was an act of faith-resistance, an act wholly integral to the meaning of his Kingdom of God message. It was, if you like, a demonstration. It was resistance inspired by faith.

But there is a question: do demos work? There is quite a lot of scepticism about them these days. Some say that demos make no real impact on existing systems of inequality and exploitation; they

succeed only in dissipating anger by helping people get something off their chests. There might well be some truth in this kind of observation. The last demo I went on myself was to join one of the gatherings in Grosvenor Square against the election of the new US president. It gathered because of some of his campaign speeches which seemed to reverse a number of gains around justice: gains in women's equality, gains in international agreements to do something about climate change, gains of anti-racism, and so on. You know the list. But did the demo achieve anything? At one level, nothing at all. It was, however, a demo of resistance, of saying 'not in my name'. It signalled that at least a proportion of the public are in deep disagreement with what is happening and the authorities have to take note. Irrespective of the outcome, sometimes there is scope for simply saying: 'Here I stand, I can do no other.'

Was Jesus saying just this? May be. Take a different example: like God, Martin Luther King had a dream for a better world, a dream of an integrated nation of equality and respect. It hasn't come about yet. Racism remains a deep fault-line in the American psyche. (And in the British psyche too, I might add). But none of this cancels out the many demos and the stand that was taken by black and white Americans for full and proper freedom in a nation of equals. Martin Luther King's dream remains one of America's milestones in the history of the struggle for civil rights and in the literature of the nation. The same is true of Jesus's resistance-entry into Jerusalem – for here we are recalling it today 2000 years on, and still as a work in progress.

So where does this leave us now? Most of us imagine that the world could be a better place than it is. And in that imagining, we will have expectations – of ourselves and of our faith. At least I hope we do. I hope in circumstances like the cynical present we retain our expectations. We pray for poverty to be ended; for the sick to be healed; for peace to prevail; for justice to prevail. And we have these expectations in spite of the fact that much of the time they seem unattainable. But then a remarkable insight is given to us through the story of Jesus's journey to execution: God is not best served by being used as a magical solution to the disappointments and injustices that we make for ourselves. God, whatever we imagine God to be, has got to be more a companion than a fixer. That's why the Epistle to the Philippians presents Jesus as emptied out like a servant. It means that when we think of God as emptied out for us we learn that God so respects our humanity that God ends up having expectations of us. It is for us to give up our preoccupation with riches; to practice forgiveness 70x7 times; to treat strangers as members of our own family, and so on. These are God's expectations of us – God's vote of confidence in human beings. And all the expectation we need of God is really that we will be given the strength to carry them out. God is not a substitute for us needing to take mature responsibility for our own actions. Salvation is the offer of servant companionship so that we play our part in helping the world become the Kingdom of justice and peace that God intends and the world needs.

The way of the cross is a near-impossible invitation to rise to these challenges. It is a costly vocation, and we shall realise this later in the week on Good Friday. But for today we simply hold on to expectation – our expectations of God and God's expectations of us. Holy Week is the most important week in the Christian calendar; let the Palm Sunday picture of the servant companion on a beast of burden guide our ponderings during it. Amen.