

Luke 19 vs 28-40

Much has been written about Palm Sunday and I'd urge you to read the parallel account in Matthew 21 and also the donkey prophecy from Zech 9 vs 9!

Contrast the entry of Jesus with how Pilate would have entered Jerusalem for the period of Passover. Interesting that Pilate's presence was to ensure peace and stability among thousands of people yet it is only Christ who can really bring peace to the souls of all people! Pilate would have sat astride a grand war horse, there would have been soldiers in ceremonial uniforms wearing swords. There would be colour, trumpet heralds, pomp and ceremony! Google the Queen's coronation in 1953 for an idea of the grandeur of Pilate's entry. Jesus arrived on a donkey to the sound of people singing, riding over dirty clothes and palm leaves. Yet Jesus is being proclaimed as king (vs 38).

The Jews were expecting a Messiah from God. They'd seen Jesus bring someone back from death. This was their man. Freedom from the Roman oppression was on the horizon! Their chant even replaced the word "he" from Psalm 118 vs 26 with the word "king". But their idea of a king was totally different to the one Jesus had in mind! He allowed their proclamations and even defended it to the pharisees (vs 40).

It could be that the stones, which he could have turned to bread in the wilderness, were part of his creation and therefore able to praise him in the same way that trees can clap their hands (Is 55 vs 12). It could be that Jesus was quoting Habakuk 2 vs 11 as a rebuke to the pharisees who had "built their realm with unjust gain" (Hab 2 vs 9). However, I think, Jesus is exaggerating the fact that anyone who is a true follower of his cannot be silenced! They just have to declare his praises!

The joyful disciples were not privy to the inner sadness Jesus felt as he considered Jerusalem. It's people misunderstood the arrival of his kingdom and it moved him to tears. (vs 41). Jesus is still misunderstood by many of our friends and relatives and neither are they privy to the tears that we weep!

At a word Jesus could easily have ousted Pilate and ruled an earthly kingdom over the Jews. Swords were not part of his procession, neither were any of the trappings of this world. But then, his kingdom was not of this earth and neither should ours be!

Praise God that he chose to reveal to us a kingdom where ordinary people like us can be given royal status and can regularly dine at the King's table.

Luke 19 vs 45-47

According to Mark's account in Mark 11, Jesus had spent the night in Bethany but now, on Monday, he returns to Jerusalem to literally "put his house in order". He was clearly unhappy about what was happening in the temple. Under the approval of the priests it had become more of a bazaar. Trading, selling doves (for sacrifice) and money changing was taking place. Unwary people were being taken advantage of because they didn't know the exchange rate. Their money was being used for personal gain rather than to build the kingdom of God.

The action Jesus took was decisive and dramatic. As a prelude to him returning the temple to its rightful purpose he quotes two phrases from the Old Testament.

The first is from Isaiah 56 vs 7. God provided the facility for foreigners (Gentiles) to come to the temple to worship. "...my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations". The area set aside for the Gentiles had become unusable for worship.

The second phrase comes from Jeremiah 7 vs 11. It's worth reading from the beginning of the chapter to vs 11 to get an idea of why Jesus was using the phrase "den of thieves/robbers".

There is warning for us here on two levels.

The temple had become a 'safe' place! Folks were living according to their sinful natures and then going to church and the rituals of worship as if to cover over their sin. But God says in vs 11 "I have been watching". God sees the heart.

The church now is wherever his people meet to praise him, pray to him and learn from him. (Incidentally, thinking of present times all of those can still be done in isolation) We need to guard our church families. We hear of many big churches, usually in the US, who deceive their members into thinking that the more money they give the more favour they find with God, while pastors of such churches are millionaires. Even local churches can deceive their members in a similar way. When I was out in Ethiopia with the International Miners Mission I attended a church service in a mud shed in a clearing in a forest. They didn't need luxury in order to meet!! Much of what Jesus was annoyed with in the temple was the focus on money making rather than on prayer and teaching.

However, there is another temple. "...your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit". Can you imagine Jesus walking into our hearts? What would he overturn and drive out? What would he replace it with? We haven't got to it yet in Colossians but Ch2 vs 8 warns us not to be taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy. There is lots of it out there wanting to become robbers of our temples.

Pray for God's protection against such thieves and pray that the church of God will stand up against those who seek to rob this country of Christian values.

I cycled to Clifton this morning in bright sun on traffic free roads. Everything is greening up. All I could hear was birdsong. I was flooded with the thought of God saying to us, "Slow down and think of me". What do you think?

Luke 20 - 21 v 4

Much is recorded here on the Tuesday of Jesus's last week due to the fact that he had re-possessed the temple for it's rightful purpose, teaching!

The chief priests and teachers of the law were annoyed that Jesus had established himself as a spiritual authority. They challenged Jesus who had some very harsh words for them. The parable of the tenants was about them and he called them "whitewashed tombs" in Matthew's account of the same day (Mat 23 v 27). They tried to trap him with clever searching questions but, with the the kind of wisdom only available to God, he evades their traps. Later in the afternoon Jesus went with his disciples up on to the Mount of Olives and spoke to them about end times and the destruction of Jerusalem.

There is lots in this passage but I wanted to make a few observations on verse 17.

The preceding parable was intended to rebuke the Pharisees for the way they had rejected the prophets of God in the past and would even kill the owners son, a reference to himself as God's son. He is speaking to all who were gathered but the Pharisees realised he was referring mainly to them! (v 19)

Luke records that Jesus looks directly at them! His eyes would have pierced the hearts of all who were watching. It only takes a look from Jesus for any one of his created beings to know that he sees people's motives. Imagine the guilt when they realised what he meant. Peter ended up in tears after a look from Jesus (Luke 22 v 61)

My King James Version uses the word 'refused' in Psalm 118 and then 'rejected' in Luke 20. Both apply to Jesus for many non-believers. It is usually an offer of something that we refuse. We reject something that we consider inadequate, unacceptable or faulty. We have all experienced people who have displayed one or other of the responses to Jesus and his offer of salvation.

However, Jesus has become the capstone/cornerstone. Again the KJV says it better. The headstone of the corner. He has gone from rejection to being exalted to the head of the church and at the right hand of God!! As a cornerstone joins two walls together so Christ joins together Jews and Gentiles, God and man and heaven and earth. He is head of all. Everything is created by him and for him!

Psalm 118 v 23 tells us that this was all God's doing. In a few days God's great plan of salvation for mankind will culminate in the crucifixion. God alone turned rejection into exaltation. He can still do this for our unsaved friends and family. We must be fervent in prayer for those we know who reject or refuse him because only God can open the eyes of their hearts.

Finally v24 of Psalm 118. Only a believer can experience this privilege and this joy. A new era has dawned for those of us who have entrusted ourselves to Jesus as Lord. That era dawned for me on July 4th 1982.

Let's rejoice and be glad in every day that the Lord gives starting now!!

John 12 vs 1-8

There is nothing written in the gospels about what happened on the Wednesday of Holy week. We know Jesus was staying in Bethany each night and probably at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. So I've flashbacked to the previous Friday to look at this amazing incident.

First you'll notice all three, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, were involved in hosting and serving Jesus. All had their roles. Martha being the domestic, Lazarus, no doubt, witnessing about how Jesus had brought him back from death and Mary who anointed Jesus. (A hospitality custom). All of us too have our roles in serving Christ and all are equally important to him.

Mary's actions, however, are intriguing.

After a wine tasting evening years ago, Lynda and I invested in a case of Amarone red wine from Italy. It is truly gorgeous but I've no idea where the remaining bottles are! Lynda has hidden them! She says they are too valuable to drink!!! (See what I have to put up with!)

Likewise this jar of perfume that Mary poured on the feet of Jesus would have been worth a fortune. Nard (or spikenard KJV Luke 12 v 3) was from the roots of a plant that grows in the Himalayas!! The ancient Egyptians kept it as a luxury. Here Mary pours it out over our Lord's feet. She recognized the status of her guest and realized she could not withhold anything from him. She demonstrated her total submission to the one who would later pour out something much more precious for her. His blood!

While teaching in the temple on Tuesday of Holy Week Jesus was asked which was the most important commandment? He replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 14 v 30).

Mary's action showed the love in her heart for Jesus. Unlike the miserly, selfish attitude of Judas,

Mary was consumed with what she could do for Jesus. Her attitude is an example to us all.

John records that the smell of the perfume filled the house. Her act of service was sensed in every room. Is our dedication to Christ evident in the same way? The mark of a person who has received new birth through God's grace has the "smell" of Christ's presence with them.

I know a man who breathed in the perfume of Christ, every day, for years as his wife demonstrated her love for the Lord. As a result, he now knows the Lord for himself and now diffuses his own perfume!

Praise God for Mary's example and pray that we too will hold nothing back in our surrender to him and the cause of the gospel.

Daily devotions Thursday 8th April 2020

Mat 26 vs 14 - 50

Before we look at some points from this passage, can I urge all those of you who believe, to take time out of your now normal routine to take communion this evening. No minister is required as it was Christ himself who broke the bread and poured out the wine. Take time in effect to join with him and his disciples and also your brothers and sisters in Christ to do this. Though we normally do this together it is really between each person and Christ. It is possible to do alone. Read the words of Mat 26 v 26-29 as a guide. Pray, eat and drink. Notice also that Jesus, despite his sorrow, still sang a hymn (v30)

What a privilege it was for Peter, James and John to be invited to be with Jesus in his darkest hour. He had to face almost unbearable sorrow alone in Gethsemane but wanted his closest three friends to “watch and pray” with him. How kind he was to them when he found them asleep! Recognising their humanity and the weakness of body, he first repeats his request (v41) then allows them to sleep on (v43). “Watch and pray” carries so much weight even now for those who wish to be close to Christ!

Three times Jesus prays the same thing (v44), thus setting an example for us to be persistent in praying the same thing. We don't read of any answer to his prayers though we can be sure his Father hears them. The answer is already in Jesus's own prayer! “Not as I will but as you will”. How often have we pleaded to God to bend his will to ours and still expect an answer!! Jesus is strengthened by an angel to face his coming ordeal and goes to meet his betrayer!

What a contrast to Mary is Judas. For no more than the cost of a slave he agreed to hand Jesus over to the Jewish authorities where there would be no crowd! The deception of Judas was incredible. He asked “Master is it I” (KJV v 25). Both knew it was him!! “Hail Master” (KJV v49) were the words he used just before he gave the signal of a prearranged kiss. But look at the response of Jesus. “ Friend why have you come?” Friend??!! First with words then with actions Judas betrayed the one he called master. How much are we like Judas? We confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord but often our words and actions don't display the loyalty we should have to him! The example of Judas is recorded as a reminder and warning to us all. It is a serious offence to let down Jesus but he called Judas friend and he calls us friends because of the love he has for us and the forgiveness he was about to accomplish for such actions the next day.

God is love (1John 4v8). While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Ro 5 v8). Search me and know my heart see if there is any offensive way in me. (Ps 139 v 23-24)

Be prepared for tomorrow. Jesus was put on the cross at 9 a.m. He died at 3 p.m. The last 3 hours were covered with darkness!

Daily Devotions Good Friday 9th April 2020

Matthew 27 v 11-55

“This is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it” Psalm 118v24
This is the day when the greatest crime against justice resulted in an agonising death for an innocent man. How can we rejoice?

Many of us know the pain of losing a parent. There is no joy in losing someone you love. Imagine the pain of losing a child, possibly your only child. God spoke from heaven at Jesus’s baptism and said “This is my son whom I love”. There would have been no joy for Him as he watched how his only son was mocked, spat on, punched, flogged and crucified!

But, Hebrews 12 v 2 says that he endured the cross for the joy that was set before him.

We rightly should be both sad and joyful on this day. Sad that the perfect, loving Jesus was ill treated and killed but joyful because of what it accomplished.

“The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed”
Isaiah 53 v 5

Despite Pilate’s reluctance, the crowds cried out to him to release Barabbas and crucify Jesus. Pilate rightly said, “What evil has he done?” v 23. He knew Barabbas was a thief and a robber but cowardly Pilate caved in to the crowd who, only 5 days earlier, had been chanting ‘Hosanna’ to him. Crowd mentality still rules. If everyone is buying toilet rolls then I’d better get some too! Social pressure drives many errant government decisions too!

Barabbas means son of the father. The wrong son of the father was released. Barabbas represents sin and the crowd preferred sin to the goodness of Christ. Has anything changed?? It was noticeable when I was a teacher how the majority of the kids would elevate the naughty ones to the status of fame (even hero!) but be ashamed to be numbered with the goody goodies! Before we accepted Christ we were the same. We preferred the company of sinners to the stigma of being associated with Christians. Barabbas was a murderer but was pardoned. We are all pardoned murderers too. It was your sin and mine for which Jesus died! “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all”
Isaiah 53 v 6

Pilate had Jesus labelled King of the Jews. That was a title the world gave him. He was the Messiah that had been promised on the Old Testament but not the kind of king the Jews wanted. They still only recognise him as a prophet!. The Bible, however calls him King of kings and Lord of lords. The ultimate ruler. Are you glad he brought you into the kingdom? Are you in the kingdom but not yet allowing his total rule in your life? Or are you still with the crowd rejecting him?

“It is finished”. Salvation reaches it’s pinnacle as Jesus shouts this from the cross just before he dies. The punishment for sin was dealt with once and for all. For this we rejoice!

Daily Devotions Saturday 11th April 2020

Mark 15 vs 42-47, John 19 vs 38-42

Saturday was the Sabbath, a day when no work was done and a bunch of soldiers stood guard over the tomb to prevent any theft of Jesus's body.

Our readings are from the Friday evening after Jesus's death.

Two men are key figures in the burial of Jesus. Both were part of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man who owned the tomb in which Jesus was to be buried. (See Isaiah 53 vs 9 for the fulfilment of yet another prophecy). He was a disciple of Christ's but a secret one! Also there was Nicodemus who was told by Jesus of the necessity of being born again (John 3 v 3). He came to Jesus at night for fear of being seen by his fellow Pharisees. We don't know how he reacted to this teaching but he did defend Jesus in the council in a fairly non committal way! (John 7 vs 50-51).

Both are now risking their reputations and status in a bold and public move to claim Jesus's body from Pilate in order to give him a proper burial. Once they were inactive believers but now they are active and seem to have shed their fear of reprisals!

What has made them change? The answer is the cross!

There are many people who say they believe, who are happy to keep their heads low, live good lives but stay inactive unlike true believers. Anyone who experiences the detail and the meaning of the cross in the way Joseph and Nicodemus did will also be changed! They will be able to declare as Paul did, "I am not ashamed of the gospel" (Romans 1 v 16).

There is another significant point of note in the burial of Jesus. During his trial Jesus was asked of Pilate, "What is truth?" (John 18 v 38). The depth in that question is immense! Is the truth about the start of the universe what Brian Cox tells us? Is the truth about the formation of the natural world what David Attenborough tells us? Is the truth what we hear and see on the BBC?

Jesus, famously, said, "I am the way the truth and the life" (John 14 v 6) so here, therefore the truth literally lies buried! We humans have a way of burying the truth when it doesn't suit our purposes!

The two Mary's were last to leave the tomb on Friday and first to arrive on Sunday morning. Are we willing to follow their example and cling to the truth when everything seems opposed to it!!

Christ will rise tomorrow! Pray he will rise and rise, more and more in our hearts!