SERMON STOWE ON PALM SUNDAY 2021

Good morning. It’s good for us to meet even if we have to be virtual. I am particularly pleased to be invited to speak about Palm Sunday which is a first for me. All of you know the story and we’ve just heard it read again of how Jesus decided to enter Jerusalem, how he involved many people who welcomed and supported him.

When I initially thought about what I’d say I wanted to look at how different individuals and groups reacted to the situation. Each of the groups involved had a different take on what was happening. As I thought about this I realised there is an inner story behind what’s written and that the only person who knew what was happening was Jesus himself. As I read Bible and commentaries I started to ask myself questions about what was going on, about how and why. I ended completely impressed at the vision and organisation that Jesus showed and that is basically what I want to share with you. Jesus knew what he wanted to achieve and he knew how he was going to achieve it. He was in control. I also came to the conclusion that the title we give to this event is incidental. Palms are very secondary to the main story. Luke’s Gospel doesn’t even mention them. As an aside I read that the word often translated as palm should be translated as leafy branches and one commentator says that palm trees don’t grow in Jerusalem which is too high and cold. Palm branches would be brought from Jericho, a day’s walk away. I was in Jerusalem 2½ years ago and took lots of photographs. I looked at them and they bear this out. Maybe there were palm trees in Jesus’ time but my photos don’t show a single palm tree. But actually that’s not important.

So back to the beginning. John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus and his disciples walked up from Jericho and stayed for a day or two at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. That seems very plausible because Jesus had a lot of organising to do. I’m sure Jesus knew the OT prophesy in Zechariah about the King entering Jerusalem on a donkey – a symbol of peace and humility. He wanted a very public entry to Jerusalem to announce his arrival but not precipitate a crisis that might cause him to lose control. Why do I mention a crisis? Jesus and his followers were being monitored, watched by agents from the Jewish leadership and from the Roman authorities. If the crowd Jesus wanted had got too big or out of hand either the Jewish authorities or the Romans military might have thought a revolution was starting and brought their military force to bear and their action would have been brutal. Jesus was walking a tightrope.

So he chose to start from Bethany on a colt, a young donkey. Was finding the colt was a divine inspiration. I think not. It’s more likely Jesus used his local contacts – he was very well known in Bethany having brought Lazarus to life again, to find where there was a colt and send someone off to make arrangements to borrow it for the day. I wouldn’t be surprised if he arranged for its return.

How to manage the crowd? If there were only a few people there would be no impact. If there were too many it would be a threat to the authorities. There were thousands of pilgrims in and around Jerusalem for Passover but no Facebook or internet to reach them and it would be impossible to control them. Only look at what happened last week with protest marches about Sarah Everard’s murder and protests in Bristol about new legislation that got out of hand. Many Jews were looking for opportunities to rebel against Rome. So I wonder if he asked residents in Bethany to join him as he went into Jerusalem. They could be managed.

We’ve got Jesus to the colt and some of his followers put their cloaks on the animal. This doesn’t seem very important to us but cloaks were vital to men and women who were travelling. If they couldn’t find somewhere to stay overnight indoors they could and did wrap themselves in their cloak, keep warm and sleep outside. Cloaks were part of their security and giving your only cloak to someone else was a sign of esteem and authority for the person and obedience from the donor – whether on the colt or on the road. 2 ½ years ago I was in Jerusalem and looked down from Mount of Olives across the Kidron valley to Jerusalem. It’s a wonderful view. With my fellow pilgrims I walked down the steep slope to the bottom and then up to Jerusalem. It’s over a mile and would take lots of cloaks to cover the road. Bible commentators relate cloaks on road to the entry to Jerusalem of victorious king Jehu. Jehu defeated King Ahab and restored worship of Yahweh and suppressed worship of Baal. Cloaks were a symbol of respect for the person you gave them to, but also a welcome for a military conqueror. That was a threat for Jesus’ role as peacemaker.

Ever since I walked that road from Mount of Olives I’ve been puzzled by the palms. The road is steep and well worn. Putting fronds of palms on the road would make it slippery and dangerous. My favourite commentator, William Barclay, writes that waving and deploying branches had a special meaning that dated back to another triumphal entry into Jerusalem – this time by Judas Maccabeus who in 163BC defeated the Greek rulers who imposed Hellenistic worship and suppressed Jewish worship. The crowd welcomed Judas Maccabeus and waved branches as a symbol of conquest and renewed domination of Jewish religion. Psalm 118 that was read contains references to waving branches.

The crowd, wherever they came from, was excited to greet Jesus, to welcome him into Jerusalem. They waved branches and shouted their delight and support. Did they expect him to lead a revolution against Rome? Perhaps but that was not Jesus’ objective – quite the opposite. In Psalm 118 the cry was Hosanna meaning ‘save us’. It was and is a prayer to God that he will come and save his people. Psalm 118 is a prayer of thanks for deliverance of the nation by an unknown descendant of King David and celebrates various high points in the troubled history of the Jews – both before and after the exile to Babylon. And Ps 118 v.26 – “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” is quite explicit. They were expecting Messiah. All of these greetings that are recorded in the gospels, and I’m sure there were lots of others, are capable of being interpreted as religious greetings, which was acceptable by the authorities or interpreted as calls to overthrow the regime and begin a new nation dedicated to the supremacy of Jews and the worship of God which was very dangerous.

There’s lots more I could say, but I want to reflect briefly on what we can learn from Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem and reflect on the role models we could follow. Firstly be impressed by the way Jesus knew his Father’s will and worked to achieve that objective. He is worthy of our worship. I find myself awestruck by his vision and foresight, his control of events and his determination to pursue them at dire cost to himself. He was brilliant, so brilliant that I feel we should not attempt to try to match him but be honest and realistic about our fallibility and sinfulness. We are more like the other players in the story. Let’s consider his disciples. They didn’t know what Jesus was planning but when given opportunities to serve Jesus they accepted the roles and did them. The man who arranged the colt did what was asked of him. The disciples gave their cloaks, their security, did it willingly either on the colt or on the road. Each of us, from time to time, will be invited to do or give something, time, talents money that costs us and maybe we don’t understand why but if it’s to serve Jesus and grow the Church we should do it. We are called to be servants who serve God and Jesus and that relationship is shown in our servant relationship with those around us.

The disciples and the crowd accompanied Jesus down the slope from Mount of Olives to the Kidron valley and up into Jerusalem. They made public their physical and vocal commitment to Jesus as they walked. They took the risk of being identified and suffering for it but their devotion to Jesus was paramount. We are called to do the same – not necessarily in such a public obvious way but each of us will have the chance to speak about our belief, our faith and trust in Jesus and to risk ridicule and being ostracised. The benefit of big gatherings like the crowd that welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem should not be overlooked. There is also a great potential witness to others if we occasionally gather in public in large numbers. So there are lessons that we as individuals and as a Christian community can learn from that unique happening that was the opening act of the end of Jesus’ earthly life.

So as we recall Palm Sunday let’s give thanks for the vision and courage of Jesus, his determination to go through with his plan that led to our salvation, give thanks for the obedience of his followers and be resolved to imitate them – to follow Jesus wherever he may lead; whatever he may ask for His sake.