

Addresses given by Fr Stephen Tucker, Holy Week Preacher 2019

WITNEY - PALM SUNDAY 2019 9.15AM HAILEY AND
10.45 ST MARY'S

And so it begins.

For the rest of this week we shall be pondering in detail the story which gave birth to the church, the story which explains why we are here.

Some years ago, the actor, Alec McCowen, decided to learn by heart and then perform before an audience the whole of Mark's gospel. On stage, he used only a table and three chairs as scenery. The furniture represented the interior of a house, in front of them was the street or by the sea and behind them were the mountains. 'Once I established this in my mind', he wrote, '... the story started to push me around.'

The purpose of this week is to let the story push us around, to push us around emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, morally. We have today heard almost the whole story in advance, as it were setting out the programme for the week during which we shall ponder some of the details. But for now, we must concentrate on the reading we heard at the start of this service – though it may strike us as odd that so important a week should begin with such elaborate arrangements for the borrowing of a donkey.

Jesus comes up to Jerusalem from Jericho to the villages on the slopes of the Mount of Olives overlooking the city. Jesus has friends here, friends that even the disciples don't seem to know about. Jesus has made arrangements for this festival in advance. As a man who has no home and no possessions, he has to depend on the generosity of his friends. Today he needs a donkey.

Actually, Jesus is breaking the law by making such an arrangement. Jerusalem is a holy city - one must enter it on foot. When Kaiser Wilhelm rode into the city on a splendid white horse in 1898, the religious authorities were dismayed and shocked. When General Allenby took possession of the city in 1917, he more diplomatically entered on foot.

Jesus behaves neither like a Kaiser nor a general, but he does behave with authority. All the disciples have to say is that the master needs the animal and the bystanders understand. Even so Jesus also makes sure that they know he will return it promptly.

It's important to realise that this isn't some willing old beast of burden grazing contentedly under a palm tree. It's a young donkey, tied up outside the door of the house where the owner can keep an eye on it and it can't run away. It's a donkey that hasn't been broken in - no-one has ridden it yet. And to the minds of the first audience that makes it a surprisingly special sort of animal. We think of great men riding on tall white horses as the Kaiser did. But kings of Israel only rode horses in battle; in peace time they rode on the back of a donkey, that no-one else had ridden.

These arrangements are beginning to take on a regal note. Jesus mounts the animal and sets out and his progress is made easier by the disciples putting their cloaks on the rough ground and scattering the path with palm branches and grass so there's no chance of the colt slipping on the uneven ground.

There are lots of people around. Anything up to 300,000 pilgrims might come up to Jerusalem for Passover. Even on the back of a donkey Jesus is lost in such a large crowd. But his part of the crowd is special. These are his people. People from the north, people from the countryside. They sing the pilgrim slogans like a holy sort of football crowd. 'Hoshia-nna - Save now.' And the special chant to encourage one another. 'Blessed in the name of the Lord is the one who comes.'

And in their midst riding on the donkey is someone they know coming into Jerusalem with a special kind of authority. If the Jerusalemites get to hear about it there'll be trouble. But now as evening draws on there's a gentle joy, an innocent enthusiasm - a chance to cheer a man on a donkey who's touched their hearts and given them something to hope for, and now for the last time something to cheer about, as they stream past the Roman soldiers massed and ready for trouble at the city gates. Once into the city's narrow streets, the donkey is presumably sent back to its owner. Jesus has made his point - though the point is a little obscure, as all prophetic gestures are.

How to read this scene now? Well think of a famous photograph. It is June 5th 1989, the day after the Tiananmen Square massacre. This scene is set on the Avenue which runs east west along the southern end of the Forbidden city in Beijing. A column of Type 59 tanks drives slowly down the broad avenue. And then a man steps out from the crowd, carrying a shopping bag in each hand, and goes to stand in front of the leading tank. It tries to go around him, but each time he moves to stand in front of it. Eventually two figures in blue come out of the crowd and lead him away, never to be heard of again. We do not know whether he is even aware that what he did produced one of the most iconic images of the twentieth century.

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem, as a king on a donkey, he did not of course face tanks but he did face a Roman prefect who had at his immediate disposal 3,000 troops and who if the need arose could call upon the Syrian legate who had 20,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry. And then there was the high priest, his Council - the Sanhedrin - and the Temple guards. And lastly there was the huge crowd of pilgrims, not all of them sympathetic and probably most of them just wanting a quiet life.

And Jesus enters this city as a king, yes - it is a dramatic, symbolic, prophetic gesture - a humble king on a donkey. But it is only a gesture as the man with his two shopping bags in front of a column of tanks was a gesture. And what do gestures count in the face of such overwhelming force - whether Chinese tanks or a Roman army which would forty years later destroy Jerusalem and its Temple?

And yet sometimes gestures are all we have; sometimes gestures become iconic; sometimes a gesture can in time become the beginning of an unstoppable movement; and these are the kind of gestures we witness this coming week - holy week - full of simple holy gestures; washing feet, breaking bread, kneeling before a cross, lighting a new candle - iconic gestures which still have the power to let the spirit of God loose in the world. Amen.

MONDAY IN HOLY WEEK – MINSTER LOVELL 7.30PM

Holy week is a life and death story. In Holy Week we speak of matters of life and death which are also our life and our death.

The word 'life' occurs in John's gospel more than in the other three gospels put together. In John's first chapter, we are told that in Jesus was life and the life was the light of the world. Later we are told that if we believe, we have everlasting life. Jesus is said to be lifegiving water; he is the bread of life. He has the words of eternal life. He is the resurrection and the life. At the end of the gospel we are told that this book has been written that we may have life in Jesus' name. And Jesus has said to Martha in the previous chapter to the one we have just heard, 'Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.' Sadly, Martha does not then say 'Whatever does that mean?' - so we are left wondering.

Now, if life and death are the agenda for Holy Week, we might be left wondering what sort of life is being talked about? Death will come later but for now we must consider life - eternal life. The word eternal raises problems. Does it mean life that goes on and on? That is unlikely. In the New Testament it is much more likely that it means the life of the age to come - in other words life in and with God, a life that cannot be taken away, but also a kind of life we can scarcely imagine, other than that it will be perfect. I say scarcely imagine, but John's gospel attempts to give

glimpses of what such life might be like. John's gospel claims that we can even experience such life now, though not all the time.

So how do we recognise the life being talked about? Clearly it is not life as we ordinarily know it. It has more to do with what we sense at the birth of a baby or the death of a loved one – something is given and something is taken away, something deeply precious, absolutely precious – even though we live in a world where that is so often forgotten. Life is a gift and therefore one definition of God is that he is the life giver, the one to whom we can express thanks for the preciousness we experience as life. And so, we might also say that to know God, means to be able to see life as precious, however much our experiences in life may sometimes make us feel something very different. Life can sometimes feel more like a heavy burden than a gift. So, we might say that belief in God, knowing God starts with our holding on through thick and thin, to the preciousness of life.

To do that, however, we need examples of what we are talking about – and tonight's gospel story provides one.

Bethany is in all the gospels a special place. It is set on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives, about 2 miles outside of Jerusalem. Today it is known as El Azariye – a name derived in Arabic from Lazarus, its most famous inhabitant. The name Bethany means house of dates or figs – it is the place of fruitfulness. It is according to all the gospels the place where Jesus stays as the last week of his life begins, in the household of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. We do not know much about these three. Martha is hard working – the provider of food. Mary is quiet and reflective – the woman who dares to sit at Jesus feet to listen to him – 'dares' because sitting at a teacher's feet was usually then reserved for men only. Lazarus, unlike his sisters, never says anything in this gospel, he is simply known as the one whom Jesus raised from the dead. Perhaps we might find that story difficult to believe, but perhaps we can at least say this: Lazarus represents someone who has had an experience of the preciousness of life because it seemed he had lost it. Life had been given back to him. And anyone who has had an experience like that must be challenged to think deeply about his life and what he is going to do with the rest of that life which has so nearly been lost.

So, Jesus is attending the last party of his life – a celebratory meal arranged by the whole village to honour and thank him. But then something strikingly odd happens. Mary anoints Jesus' feet, with a costly perfume, the fragrance of which fills the whole house. And then it says, 'Mary dried his feet with her hair.' And that is the puzzling detail. Why having gone to all the expense of anointing Jesus' feet with such perfume does Mary then wipe it away?

We have been told that clouds are gathering around Jesus. The Pharisees and the Jewish Council called the Sanhedrin, have identified what Jesus did for Lazarus as the cause of his increasing popularity. Because many more people are beginning to believe in Jesus, the Sanhedrin fearfully predict the destruction of their holy place and nation by the Romans. Jesus must therefore die for the sake of the people, or rather the preservation of the status quo. And then as we hear this evening, they decide that Lazarus must also die because of what he represents. So, the struggle between life and death unfolds.

At this party in Bethany where Jesus' love for this family spills over into the whole community it is dangerous for his whereabouts to be known. He could be arrested at any moment. So as Mary takes this precious ointment it is almost as though she feels that after Jesus has been killed by the authorities there may be no chance to give him a proper burial. She must do something now - she must make a gesture which will indicate the preciousness of the life of Jesus. Of course, it will only be a token anointing but something she feels must be done. But as she rubs this precious ointment into his feet Mary seems to sense something beyond the danger and the threat of death. 'Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.' That is what Jesus has said to them. So, what is the point of anointing anyone who can say that? If Jesus is the Lord of life then even death cannot take away his glory. In him life will be stronger than death. And so, she wipes away the ointment with her hair and in that simple gesture we might even find a hint of the

possibility of resurrection, the unconquerability of life. Perhaps now she feels embarrassed by what she has done. Jesus reassures her – keep the rest of the ointment for his burial.

Nevertheless, what Mary has done remains important. She has hinted at the glory of the body which will hang on the cross and which will signify not only a tragic suffering but also glory. For if Jesus is the Lord of life then he is also the Lord of glory - the glory of God revealed in human beings fully alive, alive in such a way that death though it may mean pain and agony holds no fear. 'Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die' – that is never die without hope of something more.

And at this party in the gathering gloom Lazarus sits by Jesus, Martha serves him, and Mary lovingly wipes his feet with her hair. Between them they form the nucleus of the church, the church as it prepares itself for Holy Week. Lazarus, the symbol of hope for new life, Martha, the symbol of faith both serving and seeking understanding, and Mary the symbol of that love which sees into the heart of glory. Amen.