

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

5<sup>th</sup> April 2020, Palm Sunday

**MATTHEW 21:1-11**

**A KING FOR US**

Many years ago, when I was a child, I remember watching the Disney movie, ‘The Prince and the Pauper’. Now, it’s been a very long time since I have seen it (although I notice it is on Disney+ so I might have to watch it again), so please excuse me if my memory is not entirely accurate. The way I remember the story is that it is set in the 1500s, and is about 2 boys aged around twelve years old. One of the boys is a prince, the heir to the throne, and is therefore brought up in a very privileged way. The other, the pauper, lives on the streets of the city, and has to fend for himself and survive everything the city has to throw against him.

One day the two boys happen to meet up (I don’t remember how that happens), and they discover that they both look and sound identical to one another. They decide to do a switch and change places with each other for a while. My memory is that initially each boy thought the other had the better life: the pauper envied the prince with his palace, servants, and plenty of food, and the prince envied the pauper with his freedom and not having the expectation of behaving like the future king always upon him. And I guess, in general, this is basic theme of the movie; as each boy experienced the life of the other they discovered that the grass isn’t always greener on the other side.

But, the reason I believe I thought of this movie while looking at the story of Jesus on Palm Sunday, is that I would say that because of this switching experience the prince would have become a better king when it was his time to rule, and what he went through living on the streets with the ‘common’ people would have helped him to relate to them more. He came down from his throne, walked with his people, went through what they go through, and so he would have been much better equipped to serve them as a leader when he was king.

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday. It is Day 1 of the biggest week in our Christian faith; the day when Jesus comes into Jerusalem. While Jesus is loudly greeted with praise by the people of the city, He knows He has come here to die. It is, by all accounts, a triumphant entry, Jesus is acclaimed as King, except that He is riding ... on a donkey? You can just imagine the reaction of the Roman soldiers to this. They were used to their great generals, men like Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great, being granted triumph parades by the Senate when they returned from successful wars. These parades would include all their victorious legions, captured slaves and other bounty, Pompey even had elephants in one of his parades – although much to his embarrassment the carriage they pulled was too big to fit through the Triumphal Arch. Many of the soldiers watching Jesus come into Jerusalem may have witnessed such triumphs when they were children in Rome, some may have even marched in one themselves. And now, look at these Jews; this man comes into their city, riding on a donkey,

and is acclaimed as King? No legions, no slaves, no bounty, and He's really not much to look at. What kind of a king is this?

What kind of a king is this? This account of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey to great shouts of praise from the people is in all four of the Gospels. Each has their different emphasis, and for Matthew the focus is very much on the humility of the King. Here Jesus is called the 'Son' of David by the crowd, where the other accounts refer to Him as 'King'. Matthew uses an Old Testament quote from the prophet Zechariah which talks about Jesus' humility and gentleness. We can also put this beside our second reading for today, Philippians 2:5-11, where Jesus is described as giving up all the power and glory He had to come down to His people, and doing this so He can serve God and His people in a better way (also reminds me of the prince in the movie I talked about before). The way Jesus comes into Jerusalem here, on His path to the cross, shows that He is a king of obedience, love, humility and gentleness. So, again, what kind of a king is this?

Through not just the Palm Sunday account, but His whole life, Jesus shows that, as our King, He is Immanuel, God with us. The One who was foretold. The One who shows that God does not sit up above His people but comes down to be with them. He doesn't rule from above but walks with His people below.

What kind of a king is this? Like the prince in the movie, He is a king who knows what His people go through, because He has been through it too. Remember our story last week on the raising of Lazarus? It contains the shortest verse in the Bible, telling us that at the death of His friend, 'Jesus wept'. It's very possible that as Jesus was growing up Joseph's carpentry business might have at times not been going so well, so His parents struggled to put food on the table. He would have seen both in His own family and in others around Him in the small community of Nazareth the struggles that relationships can go through sometimes. For His three years of ministry He travelled around with nothing but literally the clothes on His back, relying on others for food and shelter. He would have grieved over the loss of family and friends. We know He faced anguish over the death God was calling Him to go through. What kind of a king is this? A King who has been through what we go through and who knows what it is like. A King who cares, because He is a King who knows.

What we also see here so strongly from this Palm Sunday account, is that Jesus came to be a king who wouldn't look down on us and rule us from a throne, but a King who came to die for us on the cross. As such, His role as King is not to judge us or condemn us, but to do everything He can to save us. And, in this way, in Jesus we see the caring and compassionate face of our God. As we go through the hard and uncertain times, times of anxiety and stress, as we all are in different ways at the moment, in seeing our King on the cross we know there is nothing we go through that He is not with us also.

A King riding into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey. A King riding into this city to die for the sins of everyone, even for the people who will condemn Him. The Romans watching that day would certainly not have seen Him as a king. Many of the people watching, although they called out words of praise on this day, would just days later be calling out for His death. Our own actions and attitudes can also show that we don't always understand fully what kind of King He is for us. Jesus, as He begins this week heading first for the cross and then the empty tomb, shows that He is a King of love, of forgiveness, of care and compassion. A King who brings to us everything God wants our relationship with Him to be about. A King who is Immanuel. A King who truly is, in all ways, with us and for us. Amen.

### **FURTHER THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS**

As we did last week, I invite you to look at the reflections below and then to either discuss the questions here with others, or to reflect on them yourself.

#### **Leaders Who Serve**

At times like we are in now we often judge our leaders on both how 'in touch' with their people they seem to be, and how much they are willing to put themselves into the same circumstances we are in. We have recently seen government leaders, CEOs of major companies, and leaders of sporting bodies take pay cuts themselves as they also bring in cutbacks for those below them. We respect them for that; to some degree they are going through what they are putting others through. On the other side, this week I read that the King of Thailand right now is isolating himself with an entourage of 20 servants in a luxurious German hotel. Imagine how his people feel about that! We respect leaders who don't just 'talk the talk', but who 'walk the walk'. As our King, Jesus didn't just give up a bit, but gave up everything, so that He could serve us.

- Think of examples of leaders you know of, either from this current situation or previous times, who have shown real servant leadership in their actions. What is it that you really respect about them?
- What does it mean for us that Jesus came as our servant King? How would our relationship with God be different if Jesus came to be a king who rules over us from above?

#### **Caught up in the Crowd**

One thing which strikes me every year about the Palm Sunday accounts, is that no doubt many of the same people who were shouting, 'here comes the King!' on Sunday, just five days later on Friday would have been shouting, 'crucify him!'. What happened? They didn't really understand what they were saying or doing on either occasion, they were just caught up in the crowd. Their words and actions weren't their own, they allowed themselves to be led by others.

- Can you think of occasions or examples of when we are led by others? Times when we do things we know aren't right, but 'everyone else is doing it'?
- How does this affect our faith, and how we live out our faith? How can we ask God to give us strength to follow Him with the same obedience Jesus always had?

### **Triumph, Tragedy, Triumph**

Recently I re-watched the movie, *Avatar* (thanks to isolation and Disney+). It has a plot which features in many books, stories, movies, throughout time. The central characters begin with triumph and success, then go through hard times where it looks like they won't make it, but at the end they emerge triumphant again.

This is also the pattern of the Passion week for Jesus. He enters Jerusalem on Sunday in a grand parade; people waving palm leaves and putting their cloaks on the ground, Matthew even tells us that the whole city is excited. Then, He faces opposition and increasing plots to have Him killed, which results in His arrest, desertion by His friends, an unfair trial, whipping, and a painful death. It all seems to be finished. But then, of course, there is the great triumph of Easter Sunday and the Resurrection; a triumph not just for Jesus but for all of us because His new life is now ours also.

Wow, what a week!

- As we begin Holy Week with Palm Sunday, go through Matthew's Gospel, starting here in chapter 21, to see what happens. Note the things which happen in this week. The parables Jesus told as He is approaching His death. The plots planned against Him and how they were carried out. Is there anything in there which you thought happened somewhere else?
- Reflect on or discuss what this means. Did these events just happen, or had God planned them? What if Jesus at any time decided not to go through with them? How do we see the love of God shining through so strongly in all that happens in just this one week?

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Lord God, we thank you for all you have done for us in Jesus. Thank you that in obedience He came down to be one of us, to go through everything we go through, to show what it means to be a Servant King. Thankyou that Jesus really is a King for us, and that because of Him we can in no way doubt your love for us or the forgiveness you offer us. Help us to follow you with our lives and our actions also. Amen.