

Trinity Baptist Church
Palm Sunday 28th March 2021
Luke 19:41-48; 'My House Will Be A House Of Prayer'

We're pausing our series in Mark's Gospel to explore the Easter story and its effects more closely. Today, I want to look at a slightly unusual passage for Palm Sunday by focussing on Jesus' commentary on what he saw as he approached Jerusalem and entered the temple. We pick up the story just after the reading we heard at the start of our service. Luke 19:41-48.

[Read Luke 19:41-48]

41As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it 42and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. 43The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. 44They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God's coming to you.'

45When Jesus entered the temple courts, he began to drive out those who were selling. 46'It is written,' he said to them, "My house will be a house of prayer;" but you have made it "a den of robbers."

47Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. 48Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.

[Pray]

Have you ever found *your* perception of an event to be in stark contrast to *everyone* around you? I'm not sure what it says about me, but I have been in that situation a number of times. One that sticks in my mind was a Christian worship event when I was at university. Everyone around me seemed to think it was amazing. Then some people started dropping to the floor and shaking, and the excitement of those around them increased still further. Now, this was not new to me – I'd seen the Holy Spirit touch people's lives powerfully, sometimes physically before. Indeed, I'd experienced it myself. But, on this occasion, to me it felt fake, though I had no proof other than how I felt – which may have been wrong.

Interestingly, Jesus' perception of Palm Sunday appears to have been in stark contrast to that of both the crowds and the Pharisees – though in *his* case, of course, his was certainly the *truest* perception. This may have been the greatest adulation that Jesus received in his earthly life – an exuberant *honouring* of him, if not *worship* of him. The crowds quoted from Psalm 118 ("Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"), the second half of which is a great festal celebration parade, as might follow a great military victory. Perhaps the crowds recognised the significance of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey colt. For Zechariah had prophesied:

"Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
 Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
 See, your *king* comes to you,
 righteous and victorious,
 lowly and riding on a donkey,
 on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Now, Jesus did not in any way object to this celebration of him, much to the Pharisees' annoyance. Indeed, he strongly rebuked them when they tried to make him stop the crowd's praise. He clearly did not agree with *their* perception that the crowd was acting wrongly.

Yet, as he approached Jerusalem, Jesus perceived something which the crowds did not perceive. This great show of adulation, though thoroughly deserved and therefore right, was also, for many, somewhat superficial. These same people, less than a week later, would do nothing to prevent Jesus' crucifixion, whether or not they directly called for it. This same city would largely reject Jesus as their Lord and refuse to recognise in him God himself coming to them.

Instead, they would stand at the foot of his cross and taunt him. And Jesus foresaw the terrible consequences of their wilful blindness to who he is. Hence, while all around were joyfully singing, Jesus was *weeping*: “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes.” And he went on to prophesy the merciless destruction of Jerusalem and its temple that occurred in AD70, when the Romans crushed yet another petulant revolt, as the Jews tried to free themselves from oppression *their way*, instead of recognising God’s salvation when it came to them.

It is a truly dreadful thing to reject the Saviour God sent to us! For, to reject God’s Saviour is to reject God’s help, which can only lead to judgement. And Jesus’ clearing of the temple was an acted-out warning of imminent judgement. If, as Mark states, the temple clearing actually happened not on Sunday night, but on Monday morning, then Jesus’ actions were not a knee-jerk emotional response, but a planned prophetic message.

Again, to understand why Jesus cleared the temple, we have to delve back into the Old Testament passages that he quoted to explain his actions. Arguably, Luke strips back all but the bare essential narrative precisely to highlight these quotes. Firstly, Jesus outlined God’s purposes for the temple, from Isaiah 56:7: “My house will be a house of *prayer*.” Surprisingly, unlike Mark, Luke omits “for all nations” from the end of the quote. It’s a surprising omission, given Luke’s clear interest in the Gentiles being welcomed into God’s people through Jesus. But, nevertheless, it is likely that *Jesus* had this context in mind. For it is the main thrust of the glorious vision in Isaiah 56 that one day *all* peoples will be welcomed into God’s temple as equals to worship God. No more racial supremacy! The only division would be between those who seek God in pure worship, and those who either reject him or taint their worship with injustice.

That was God’s purpose for his temple. But what did *Jesus* see? He saw the outer “Courtyard of the Gentiles,” the only place in the temple that non-Jews were permitted to enter, full of people buying and selling. From other Gospels, we learn that they were trading in the essentials for worship – cattle, sheep and doves used in sacrifices, money-changing so that people could pay the temple tax in the only permitted currency. These stalls should have provided valuable *services* for those who travelled far to come to Jerusalem, saving them from having to drive their animals over many miles, enabling them to make their contributions to the temple. So, what was Jesus’ objection?

It may have been to the *location* of the trading – loudly carrying on in the *one* place where Gentiles were permitted to worship. But his second quote from Jeremiah 7:11 suggests that there is a further objection. Jeremiah 7 is an unrelenting warning of imminent judgement upon Israel for their hypocrisy in coming to God’s temple with every *appearance* of wanting to worship God, whilst their day-to-day actions were full of *injustice, unfaithfulness and idolatry*.

“Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!’ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave to your ancestors for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. ‘Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, ‘We are safe’ – safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching!’ declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 7:4-11).

“I have been watching!” Ominous words for Israel in Jeremiah’s day, which sadly they completely ignored. And ominous words for Jesus’ contemporaries. In quoting this passage, Jesus accused *them* of similar exploitation of the poor and needy, disregard for God’s holiness, and duplicity of heart in so-called worship. Alongside their treatment of other races as second-class citizens, the Jewish leaders were becoming extremely wealthy by exploiting the poor and needy, charging inflated prices for objects essential for worship, and demanding from the poor the same contribution for the upkeep of the temple as from the rich. Like Jeremiah, Jesus called them to repentance. And, like the people of Jeremiah’s day, the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day responded by seeking to silence (in this case kill) the messenger, rather than by repenting of their ways.

Yet, before we judge them, we need to examine ourselves to see whether we are any different. How do I respond to Jesus? Do I acknowledge him for who he is and why he came – God the Son in human flesh, born to be our Lord and Saviour? Or am I wilfully refusing to bow my knee before him?

And, if I claim to bow my knee to him, do my actions match my claim? Using Jeremiah 7 as a sample checklist, and reading it through the filter of the standards Jesus set for his followers: Am I honest and just in all my financial dealings, and for that matter in how I speak of others? In a nation that is becoming increasingly hostile to people of other nations, do my attitude and actions match Jesus' passion to *welcome* foreigners? Do I stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves? Is there violence in my heart? Do I steal money, possessions, time or ideas? Is there hate in me, or lust, or false witness about others? Have I allowed anyone or anything to become an object of my devotion alongside God? We humans are very good at excusing our own sin. God grant us the courage to say to him, as David did at the end of Ps 139:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting."

Let's take the time this week to ask that question and to listen to God's answer. Amen?

[Pray]