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Palm Sunday 25.3.18

John 12: 12-16

Psalm 118: 19-end

Today we begin our journey through Holy Week. Palm Sunday, a procession, crowds cheering, waving palms, as Jesus, riding on a donkey, makes his way down the hill from Bethany to the temple, in the heart of Jerusalem.

I wonder when you last watched a procession pass by?. Will you be lining the streets, of Windsor on 19th May, to watch the procession for the royal wedding? Processions can be quite emotive. All the times I have stood with excited children waiting to see the Queen pass by as the carriages process towards Ascot racecourse each June. Somehow when you are there the excitement of the crowd is catching. I'm not known for exuberant expression but even I have been known to cheer and wave a Union Jack.

Rewind 2000 years. Thousands of people were making their way to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, chatting as they walked, the holiday atmosphere building. They hear that Jesus is coming their way riding on a donkey. A totally different sort of Royal procession. They were used to kings and victors returning from battle marching through the streets and more recently the invading Roman battalions making sure everyone knew they were a power to be reckoned with. But this procession was very different, a man, alone, on a donkey, and yet there was something absolutely captivating about it, you had to join in. There was cheering, laughter, celebration, grab a branch and wave it, what is it the others are shouting, "Hosanna". This is fun! But what's the other thing they are shouting "Blessed is the king of Israel". If this man Jesus is the King. What does this mean? If Jesus is our true King what will he do for us? What will the reign of King Jesus look like? This is too big a question for today but I'd like us to think about one aspect of it. Freedom. Jesus invites us into freedom.

Like all the gospel stories Palm Sunday is so rich in meaning that there can be layer upon layer of interpretation. I think this is particularly so in John's gospel. Decades passed before John actually wrote down all he experienced in his 3 years with Jesus. How he must have pondered on the relevance of the events he witnessed. John deliberately places the Palm Sunday narrative in the story of Lazarus.

The brother of Mary and Martha who fell ill. The sisters call for Jesus but by the time he gets there Lazarus has been in the tomb 4 days. Everyone's weeping and wailing. Jesus weeps with them. Jesus asks for the stone to be rolled away and calls Lazarus out. Lazarus is raised from the dead. This was witnessed by all the mourners. This man Jesus has the power to raise the dead. Exciting news travels fast. What else will Jesus do? So crowds of people gather coming in search of Jesus, who even defeats death.

This crowd joins the crowd travelling to Jerusalem for the Passover. 2 crowds coming together. Quite a procession! The raising of Lazarus crowd and the Passover crowd. What do they have in common? I think it is more than being in on the action. I think it is their desire for freedom. Freedom is what the people long for and what the Pharisees dread. They feel so threatened by Jesus that from this point on they are seriously plotting to kill

Him. They fear a riot and they have a problem it's almost the annual Jewish Passover festival.

To remind ourselves, Passover is the event before the exodus, all about God freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The story is found in Exodus 12. Each household was to kill a year old lamb, put some of the blood on the door posts of the house, cook and eat the meat. That night the Angel of death killed every Egyptian first born but passed over the houses of the Jews. This was the final blow for Pharaoh and he allowed the Jews to leave. God instructed the Israelites to celebrate the Passover every year with a festival. Celebrating their freedom! The annual festival celebrating freedom at the same time as Jesus showing that he offers freedom from death, by the raising of Lazarus.

No wonder the crowds were flocking to catch a glimpse of Jesus. Riding in procession on a donkey was a clear unspoken message, prophesied 100's of years before, that Jesus is The King. The true King. The crowds thought he was going to raise an army and free the Jews from Roman occupation. Jesus did come to set them, and us, free but not in the way they expected.

Several of our Eucharistic prayers have 4 acclamations of faith. One reads "Jesus is Lord: Lord, by your cross and resurrection you have set us free. You are the saviour of the world". Notice "have" not "will have". We may not feel free.

Jesus came to set us free, but what does this look like? We are so fortunate in this country. In many countries I would be in danger of being arrested for just standing here talking about Jesus. So much of our freedom we take for granted. On our return from our trip to the holy land our case was singled out by customs and we were told to wait in a long queue. We watched nervously as people in front of us had their luggage opened and examined. One girl was taken off for questioning. Eventually our turn came. It transpired that they thought the pottery plates we had in our case were a landmine! What a sense of freedom and relief we felt when we were allowed to rejoin our colleagues.

But our lives can still have areas where we feel trapped, restricted. We often think of freedom in terms of freedom from... If I wasn't in this or that relationship, if I had a more interesting job. Freedom from this virus that is dragging on. Freedom from this traffic jam. Yes this is one type of freedom that Jesus can certainly help us with but what I would like to suggest to you that there is another type of freedom. Rather than "freedom from" Jesus is more interested in offering us "freedom to".. Freedom to become the person God created us to be. Our true selves. Jesus says "the truth will set you free". Freedom in Christ is about transformation. Living in the freedom that Jesus died to give us.

Recently Terry and I did a 60 hour baby sitting stint while my daughter and son in law went to Rome. It took me back in time, revisiting all the emotions of over 30years ago when I had 2 young children. Parenting is hard work! Constantly meeting the needs of others was a real challenge for me. I felt trapped. I was full of internal tension. I loved my children I wanted to do be a good parent but a voice, in my head, shouted "what about me?"

I became a Christian when my children were 5 and 3. There was no overnight change but gradually, as I grew in faith, I started to feel freer. A sense of relief and gratitude as I realised how much Jesus had done for me. Now I had resources beyond myself. Thank you Lord Jesus.

Jesus rides alone, through all the cheering and adoring crowds, towards his passion. His love for us and desire to free us from our sin and brokenness, into truth and new life, overrides his fear of the agony he will go through on our behalf. How many of the crowd will become his followers? How many will be caught up in another crowd a few days later shouting "crucify him, crucify him!"?

On the way to Windsor the other day I noticed a sign outside the Queensmead school (Bridgidine) saying "Be all you can be..". I imagine it is their mission statement, their hope to maximise the potential in their pupils. A good education is worth a lot but it only can take us so far. Jesus can take us so much further, he sets us free, to be ourselves, as we worship him and acknowledge him as King.