

Freedom for the captives

Readings from Psalm 118 (the psalm the disciples sang as they came to Jerusalem) and Luke 19:28-40

I've always struggled with Palm Sunday and I think it's the bizarre occurrence of everyone shouting and clapping and singing and cheering as Jesus comes to Jerusalem to suffer and die.

I have the advantage of the whole story and the disciples didn't. We know what happens next.

Last week Jane (Ward-Hall) opened up the intriguing question of what Jesus actually knew??

Clearly Jesus knew the big picture. Matthew 17:22-23

When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.' And the disciples were filled with grief.

I believe that on this "Triumphal Entry" occasion Jesus was consciously fulfilling scripture about himself as the Messiah. He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey thus fulfilling prophecy. Matthew again... (21:4&5)

This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵'Say to Daughter Zion,

*"See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

I don't think Jesus knew every single detail and aspect of what was to occur so some things are instinctive and of the moment.

On entering Jerusalem Jesus goes to the temple.

⁴⁵ When 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"⁴⁷; but you have made it "a den of robbers"

What WE know about Jesus, is that he came to bring Freedom. Freedom for the captives is at the very heart of all he was about and came to achieve.

When he saw a temple turned into a market place; the place of peace and encounter with God the Father noisy and disturbed and chaotic, he responded, driving them out..."my house will be a house of prayer".

Freedom captures so much of what Jesus was about and as the gospel stories lead up to the crucifixion, freedom is shaping the story.

In Luke's gospel; the same chapter we are in today starts with the story of Zacchaeus. A collaborator with the Romans, he is trapped by his wealth and his status. He's a captive, despite what others may think. Jesus sets him free. You know the story of Zacchaeus.

Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'

In John's gospel, Lazarus is trapped by death. You might regard that as a slightly more permanent and difficult situation for Jesus to deal with...but you know what happens there. Displaying his power and authority, Jesus calls Lazarus back to life. Jesus can give freedom even from death.

Where do you think Lazarus was when he was dead?
Where did Jesus go when he died?

Freedom for the captives

What was he doing on Easter Saturday?

A few years ago I read a book called "the lie of Hell" and recently I've been working through it again. The author is meticulous and rigorous in examining scripture to develop a clear understanding of this rather neglected area of teaching.

He makes the point that two words that are totally different, that speak of different places, are both translated "Hell". Thus we get mixed up about what we mean when we talk about Hell. The idea of Hell is rather uncomfortable to say the least alongside a loving, forgiving, merciful God. Are people really going to be toasted in flames for all of eternity??

I haven't time for the whole of it now – I will return to this again and please – if anyone wants to discuss this, debate with me, offer their insights...I really would be glad to explore it with you.

Roger Harper points out that Gehenna, is a lake of fire for destruction. Hades is a place of enduring existence awaiting the final judgement. Different places, different purposes. To translate both of them "hell" is misleading.

He suggests that Hades is a place of enduring existence beyond this life. He refers to it as a remand prison for those waiting the final judgement.

It's clear that those who accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour at death go to be with him...we need look no further than the thief on the cross. Jesus says "today you will be with me in paradise".

To the disciples Jesus is re-assuring "in my Father's house there are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for

you and will come and take you to be where I am. Believe in God believe also in me".

What though of everyone else? What of those who have never heard of Christ? What of those who were born and died before Christ? What of those who faithfully followed another religion?

Roger suggests that Hades is the place of existence after this life and it's here that Jesus descends on Good Friday. He goes to the place of the dead.

In Revelation chapter 1 we read the old Apostle John having a vision.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

In other verses and texts, Roger Harper goes on to explore his understanding of the nature of Hades, the purpose of Gehenna and that Jesus holds the keys and can come and go as he please.

There is no place, in heaven on earth or under the earth that is not subject to the rule and reign of the risen Lord Jesus Christ...and whether they knew it or not...what he was to achieve as he came to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is worth praising and shouting about. *Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven.*

But what does Palm Sunday mean to us and the idea I have focussed on concerning freedom?

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The freedom of the temple is just a picture of the freedom Jesus wants each of us to experience. Just as that place was restricted and made chaotic by the market, so our lives can become restricted by all manner of things and consequently, chaotic.

Wealth and status restrict Zacchaeus. Low self-esteem affects many people. Old memories and experiences can trap us, misunderstanding about God and what he is really like, social pressures, peer pressures, family pressures I could go on listing all day. In what way do you not feel free?

He came that you might have freedom.

And we have a joyful hope. Death is not the end and the final judgment is one of justice and mercy. Jesus holds the keys of Hades and no-one from any time and place and situation is beyond his reach in the heavens, on the earth or under the earth. He is Lord of all. Heaven, is His heaven.

How might we access the freedom that I'm speaking of?

By remembering how costly it was.

(At this point the Palm Crosses were handed out)

If we take the Palm cross we hold in our hands a symbol of cruelty and death. We hold in our hands the key to our freedom and peace. If Jesus was willing to die so that I might be forgiven and share eternity with him, he's not going to leave me trapped in a half-life.

(Note) At this point in all three services I led the church in a prayer, reflecting on the power of the cross and the capacity for Christ to bring freedom.

If you are reading this on-line that opportunity is yours too.

I have spare Palm Crosses!! Get in touch or come down to church and spend some time reflecting on the things that make you feel trapped...and offer a prayer requesting your freedom.

Revd. Jon Hutchinson.