

Joy and Sorrow and Joy

The Triumphant Entry to Jerusalem and the Suffering Servant. CMCC 28.3.10

Good afternoon friends. Have you ever felt a deep sadness while everybody round you is joyful? For example, as a father and grandfather I wonder how I'd feel if the paediatrician told me that my new baby was profoundly deaf, for example. All my friends and acquaintances who don't know are rejoicing, saying what a beautiful baby I have. But my heart is breaking. Or perhaps you have a task ahead which is hugely worthwhile. You feel determined and purposeful about it. But you know the journey to that achievement will be long and hard, with many painful experiences along the way, and unwanted consequences. Friends, our Lord Jesus knows just what these things feel like. As the book of Hebrews says, '*He is able to sympathise with us*' in this, as in all the experiences of our lives. I start this way because our story on Palm Sunday is, of course, the story of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem with crowds shouting and clapping and praising God all around him. But at the centre of that storm of excitement and enthusiasm is a stillness -- Jesus weeping. The tears trickling down his sunburned cheeks are for the city just over the valley. He sobs for the conflicts, the rejection and betrayal, the injustice, the cruelty and the cross which lie ahead. A tourist guide cries out, "I hope you enjoy a wonderful week in Jerusalem, rabbi. Come and see us just inside the Fish Gate." ... Yeah, right.

My message today is called Joy and Sorrow and Joy. The title tries to capture a mystery. Things are happening on Palm Sunday on 3 different emotional levels. On the surface a king is on a journey into his capital city with joyful celebration and song. Beneath that surface, only Jesus himself understands the sorrow which lies ahead, his agony of body, mind and spirit. But beneath that layer of mind-numbing sorrow there lies something deeper, a fierce joy which drives Jesus on towards the cross. The joy of completely fulfilling the will of his Father God. 'An inexpressible and glorious joy for the salvation of our souls.' as the apostle Peter says it. So my title is Joy and Sorrow and Joy the three levels of what was happening on Palm Sunday.

Annette and I have been so much enjoying this beautiful Lenten Devotional. We are really grateful to all of you who have contributed this week on the theme of the Suffering Servant. Andy writes of the 'runner's high', that feeling he could keep running for miles. But it takes courage and discipline to reach that 'runner's high'. And then the peace and the sense of being truly alive when the race is run. Paul and Stefan both write of the Apostle Paul's determined commitment to be a suffering servant for the people he worked amongst, walking in the shoes of Jesus. Lisette notes that rejoicing and suffering just don't go together, not usually in life. So what could the Apostle Paul be meaning when he said, "I am glad when I suffer." Can we identify with Lisette's friend in a nearby country whose husband has been imprisoned and tortured for Christ and yet she writes, "I rejoice when I suffer for his church."..... On Palm Sunday there's a superficial joy from the crowds. And there's real, deep sorrow and suffering for Jesus. And then deeper again there's joy through the sorrow and in the sorrow. Joy and sorrow and joy. That's our title from the Palm Sunday story of Jesus entering Jerusalem in triumph.

Let's explore all that by reading this passage in Luke's gospel chapter 19 verse 28. It appears in all four gospels and you might like to read it this week in Matthew, Mark and John's accounts.

Barbro will read for us.

Read Luke 19:28-44.

You may want to keep your Bible open as we talk through the story Barbro has read. Jesus, with deliberation and authority arranged for a colt to ride on. This is the only time we ever hear of Jesus riding. He was setting the stage for a drama to be played out. Just a short while earlier on the journey Jesus had said to his disciples, *“The rulers of the gentiles Lord it over them. Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”* Now here Jesus was consciously acting out his teaching, as Old Testament prophets did with their dramatised messages.

Jesus deliberately set up a sacred occasion by requiring a colt, a young animal which had never been ridden before. In the religion of the Jews an unused animal, unbroken, was required for a sacred event. And this was a small donkey too, with its mother trailing along beside. This is obviously not the usual king entering his capital city on a white horse in pomp and ceremony. But the disciples and the crowd do their best to amp the scene up. Trying to improve the props and costuming they put their cloaks on the colt’s rough-haired back. Some even put their cloaks on the ground to cover the rocks and stones, the weeds and camel droppings. But what is in Jesus’ mind as he rides? There’s an Old Testament prophecy. Let’s read that from Zechariah chapter 9 verse 9. *‘Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem. See your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will take away the chariots and the war-horses from Jerusalem. He will proclaim peace to the nations.’*

Remember that Jesus, with his Galilean followers and supporters and other pilgrims, is coming into Jerusalem for the annual Passover festival. Whenever festival pilgrims would arrive at Jerusalem the residents of the city would give traditional greetings to the newcomers, singing Psalms and waving branches. Those pilgrims who had already arrived would also greet the people coming in. So there’s festivity and excitement in the air. The pilgrim crowd walking in with Jesus reached the top of the ridge to the east. Suddenly the city and the glorious golden temple burst into view across the valley. The singing and loud shouting broke out just at that point. The traditional songs included Psalm 118, *‘Hosanna. O Lord save us.* (That phrase ‘save us’ is the word Hosanna in the New Testament.) *Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. With boughs in hand join in the festal procession.’* says Psalm 118.

Once again there are three levels of meaning in this word ‘hosanna’ that the disciples and all the large crowd of people are shouting. Many people, perhaps especially the welcoming crowds, are simply singing and shouting the usual festival greetings -- as we might say, ‘Merry Christmas’. The word ‘hosanna’ in this period had come to be just a general exclamation of praise to God. As we say ‘hallelujah’. This is one level of meaning. But then others, especially the Galileans coming down with Jesus and his large group of travelling companions, supporters and disciples, are shouting ‘hosanna’ with its full meaning of national liberation. ‘*Save us, O Lord*’ in Psalm 118 was a nationalistic cry. And also the palm leaf had become a nationalistic symbol in the days of the Maccabean liberators a couple of centuries back. On coins and flags. So at a second level this part of the crowd is moving into dangerous, political territory, calling on Jesus to save them from their Roman overlords. But Jesus is not riding a white war horse. He is riding a colt of a donkey. So the third level of meaning of ‘Hosanna’ is recognized only by Jesus himself. ‘O Lord save us.’ Yes indeed -- Jesus has come to save his

people. But to save them from their sins. He has come to change their hearts not their rulers. And his way of salvation is the way of suffering and the cross.

Just at this point there's a sour little interruption onto the stage. *'Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples."* They are jealous of Jesus' charisma, his popularity. They are frustrated because they don't know how to deal with him. They are fearful of the Romans' reaction to excited crowds shouting about a king and a kingdom (as mentioned in Mark and John's gospels). And (I'm guessing) they may just have been uptight little men who hate to see others getting out-of-control excited.

Jesus snaps out of his focus and says, fiercely I think, *'I tell you, if they keep quiet the stones will cry out.'* And I'm guessing too that this is the point at which Jesus' composure goes. These Pharisees, spiritual leaders among the people, have totally rejected the way of Jesus. Their eyes have been blind to the will of God and closed to the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus. So as Jesus looks at them with, the backdrop across the valley of the temple and the city, his heart breaks for their hardness of heart. And he begins to weep. *'If only you had known what would bring you peace. But now it is hidden from your eyes.'* He's thinking of the prophet Zechariah again, *'Your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, riding on a colt. He takes away the chariots and war-horses and will proclaim peace.'* Then in verse 43 there, Jesus as a prophet, looking into the future through his tears, has a vision of the Roman armies surrounding Jerusalem after the Jewish revolt 30 years later. He sees the huge temple stones burning. He sees legionnaires hurling children from the cliff-top onto the rocks of the valley. And he weeps for Jerusalem and for his people. *'If only'*, he cried. *'If only you would recognize the time of God's coming to you.'* ...

In our Lenten devotional Jane wrote this. *"Knowing Jesus was a man of sorrows comforts me. Because I know that he suffered greater sorrow than I ever will.'* In 2nd Corinthians chapter 1 Paul says, *'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.'* Friends, do you know the feeling of the comforting arm of God around your shoulders as you suffer?.....

On Palm Sunday there are two realities. The external, the apparent, is joy, singing and shouting, excitable talk about the king and his kingdom. But the internal is another reality. Jesus knows that in the journey ahead, the week ahead, he will be rejected, betrayed, arrested, abandoned, tried, whipped, spat on, slapped, have his beard torn out, scourged, tortured with a crown of thorns, mocked, ridiculed, and ultimately killed. Where were all these enthusiastic people then?

Ann wrote here, *'Jesus refused a crown of pomp but he accepted a crown of thorns.'* Then she wrote, *'I cannot fathom, nor can I wrap my finite mind around, neither can I understand, how anyone can so empty himself to serve as Jesus did for us. I can only bow and worship and strive to live a life that reflects God's glory.'* *'What a wonder that the Messiah would suffer,'* Art says. *'Oh what a mystery, meekness and majesty'*, as the hymn says, *'Bow down and worship, for this is your God.'*

But Jane asks a significant question: *'While Jesus embraced the sorrow, he wasn't overwhelmed by it. How did he cope with his deep sorrow? Answer, He was also a man of great joy. Joy balanced sorrow.'* On Palm Sunday, as I have said, there was a superficial

joy from the crowds. But that didn't resource Jesus against the deeper sorrow which made him break down and weep. What resourced Jesus way down deep was a sustaining, nurturing, coping-mechanism joy. Joy, sorrow, joy.

In John 15 Jesus said to his disciples, "*I have obeyed my Father's commands and I remain in his love. I've told you this so that my joy may be in you.*" And in John 17 in his lovely prayer for his disciples Jesus prays, "*Father, may they have the full measure of my joy within them.*" Jesus was resourced for all the challenges of his life by a deep joy, strong and steady -- the joy of obedience to the purpose of God in his life and the assurance of the love of God for him.... Way back in their relationship as Rabbi and students, Jesus sent the 12 out on a mission, two by two. They returned excited and joyful. Jesus was absolutely elated. He said, "*I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.*" 'Full of joy through the Holy Spirit Jesus prayed, "*I praise you Father.*"' Full of joy. There's his secret. Jesus was resourced for all the challenges of his life by a deep joy, strong and steady. One of my favourite verses about Jesus is in Hebrews chapter 12 verse 2. '*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down on the right hand of God.*' I like to think that some of the joy Jesus saw before him was you and me here today. He fixed his eyes on me and on you that first Palm Sunday as he rode that colt into the valley of the shadow of death. It was by a fierce, rescuing, sacrificial joy that Jesus scorned the shame ahead and endured the cross. He didn't enjoy the cross! Of course not! He endured it because of the joy he saw before him, the joy of bringing many sons to glory -- and daughters. And he was resourced for that endurance by the joy that was always within him, the joy of completely fulfilling the purpose of God.

Art's Lenten reflection points this out from an Old Testament prophecy. Isaiah says in chapter 50 that the suffering servant will set his face like stone, to the terrible task ahead because he would not rebel against the instructions of his Father. The wholly obedient servant was a deeply joyful servant who thus was able to steel himself to be the suffering servant

So to summarise, this has been my message from the Palm Sunday story. i) There was joy among the crowds for the coming king, ii) there was sorrow from the king himself who saw the awful future, iii) but there was a deep and driving joy within the king to face that future, a joy which a) looked back on a life wholly dedicated to the will of God and the work of God, and a joy which b) looked forward to the wonderful outcome of his suffering which includes you and me here today born into God's family by faith....

So to end then, what is the challenge for us in all this? How are we to respond to the joy and the sorrow and the joy of Palm Sunday? The problem with palm branches is that once they're torn down they don't live long. The problem with Palm Sunday is that the excitement of the crowd soon faded. They seriously misunderstood the message. Their enthusiasm for Jesus was based on the exciting things they expected he would do for them. They were willing to follow Jesus on the way to a throne but not on the way to a cross. They would wave palms for a coming king but they would not follow a suffering servant. Hmm!? I wonder does that feel familiar? ... Is your enthusiasm for Jesus based on the exciting things you expect he will do for you.

The journey with Jesus is indeed exciting, as most of us know. But our motivation is not the exciting things he will do for us but the exciting things he will do in us and through us. And the journey may be exciting, but there will be hardship and suffering along the way. And most of us know that too.

Paul's reflection speaks of broken trust, loss of face, betrayal, shame, abuse, afflictions, hardship, distress. Stefan tells us of brothers and sisters he recently met who live their life of faith in situations of great risk and serious persecution. Andy quotes the verse in Colossians where the Christian journey is a fellowship of suffering, sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

How do we respond to this Biblical reality? Do we know how to weep with those who weep like the wife and mother Lisette mentions whose husband is in prison in a nearby country because he follows Jesus. Or are we only wired for success, rejoicing with those who rejoice? Those of us here who are in Christ by faith, let us commit to joining the fellowship of his suffering resourced by his joy. But how are we to be resourced for that sustaining joy? In the same way that Jesus was.

- i) Sustaining joy arises from our lives being wholly dedicated to God and obedient to his will and his way. As I mentioned from John 15 and Isaiah 50.
- ii) Resourcing joy arises from knowing deep in our hearts and minds that we are loved by God -- surrounded by, supported by, sustained by the love of God as I read about Jesus in John 15.
- iii) Nurturing joy arises from moments of transcendence, glimpses of glory we catch from time to time in life. Jesus experienced such when he saw Satan falling like lightning from the sky as a result of the mission. Jane says so sweetly, *'A sunrise that splashed pink across wispy clouds reached in and pulled the joy in me to the surface.'* Andy shared the runner's *'sense of being truly alive'*.

Friends are any of us finding the race a real hard struggle right now? Andy gave us a prayer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for you and me to pray this week *'Give me grace today that I may see only him who goes before and not the road ahead, which is too hard.'*

I will finish with Art's prayer, *'Lord please give us faith-filled courage and resolve to walk hard and painful paths you take us on, undeterred in following and glorifying you.'* Amen. And a post-script from Jane's little poem for yesterday, *'Lord you said, "Joy comes in the morning" but you didn't say when morning comes. I will wait. There is nowhere else to go. Only you have the words of life.'* I like that.