

11am - Langton Long - Sunday 16 March 2008

“Palm Sunday”

Zechariah 9:9-17, Matthew 21:1-11

Rev Tim Storey

*Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ*

*Who are you? What have you sacrificed?*

*Jesus Christ, Superstar*

*Do you think you're what they say you are?*

The lyrics of Tim Rice shaped the questions of many about the Christian faith in a generation which questioned the integrity of Jesus himself. This man who rides into Jerusalem on the humblest of beasts

Matthew 21:10 *When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"*

At that moment, a Superstar. His disciples would die for him, The crowds would do anything for him, And Creation itself praises the arrival of the Messiah.

In Luke 19:39 we are told that *Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."* But the whole city asks "Who is this?"

Tim Rice's question stands: *Do you think you are what they say you are?*

The Crowd which shouts Hosanna is shouting a word which means "Save us". Whatever they may mean, that is what they are shouting. Is it "Hosanna", - save us from the Romans? Or do they mean "Hosanna" - save us from ourselves? Or even "Hosanna" - save us from our sins? Whatever it is, the question is not who they think he is, but who he knows he is.

The whole city asks "Who is this?" Of course Tim Rice's question is the wrong one: He asks

*Do you think you are what they say you are?* The real question is *Are you who you say you are?* It was CS Lewis who once wrote this: *'I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of thing Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic- on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.'*

As this man rides into Jerusalem the Crowds praise him, lost in the euphoria of the moment and their expectations of him. They have already decided who he is, like the press decide what sort of a man will be the new kid on the block politician or media star. The crowd have built him up and surely they will pull him down again. Nothing changes. The whole city asks "Who is this?"

In Luke 9:18 Jesus asks his disciples, *"Who do the crowds say I am?"* and they give the answer but he responds with *"But what about you?" "Who do you say I am?"* to which

Peter reveals, prompted as Jesus says by the Holy Spirit, **"The Christ of God."** As the Crowds see Jesus ride into Jerusalem so the question is asked again. Who do you say Jesus is? At that moment he is whatever he wants to be. The emotion of the moment - always a dangerous thing, means that on this day the crowd is caught up in the positive expectations of this man. At that moment he is whatever he wants to be. And yet, a few days later The emotion of the moment means that on that day the crowd is caught up in the negative response to a man who has not been what they wanted him to be. The question posed by this solitary figure on a donkey amid the crowds is the same "Who do you say I am?" O yes, they want a Messiah, a Saviour even a King, but what sort of Messiah, Saviour, King do you want?

Go back to the old testament and we find in 1 Samuel the story of how Israel had a king in the first place. God had brought them out of Egypt. God had brought them through the wilderness. God had given them victory at Jericho. God had settled them in the Promised Land. God was their King. They did not need any other - and God had given them Judges to enable the society to function. But what happened? They took their eyes off of God and looked around them. And, like Peter on the waves they began to sink.

They went to Samuel the Judge and said in 1 Samuel 8:5 ***"You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."***

Verse 7 ***And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king."***

And God goes on to warn the people of what having a King means. But they persist and turn away from the Kingdom of God to become the Kingdom of Israel. They knew what sort of King they wanted and, exactly in the way that people do today - they want to have it their way.

As do the Crowd on Palm Sunday. Jesus has proclaimed the Kingdom of God and has given them the opportunity to go back to the days when God was King. Given the corrupt King that was in place in Jerusalem at that time, a puppet of the Romans who cared little for people or for God, the restoration of the Kingdom of God must have been very attractive at that moment. But there was a problem. A challenging and disturbing problem. A problem that came in the shape of the man riding a donkey. "Hosanna" - save us from the Romans "Hosanna" - be our King "Hosanna" - save us from ourselves.

Whatever it is they have an agenda - they know what sort of King they want. But, it is a simple fact that Kings are not elected. Kings do not come with manifestos to be voted on, policies to be debated on TV before being placed before the electorate. Kings come as who they are - as a nonnegotiable package. And once you have one - you have one until you throw him out or kill him. History is littered with the bodies of Kings who offered so much but were rejected by the people who found out the truth too late. Jesus asks the Crowd "Who am I?" And built into that question is another question "What sort of Saviour, King, Messiah do you want?" And within days we know the answer.

This is our God, the Servant King. This the one who gave up everything in the name of love that we might gain salvation. This is the King who knelt at the feet of his disciples and washed them. This is the King who was willing to offer himself. That wasn't the Saviour, King, Messiah they wanted. And so, again, they rejected the King of Heaven in favour of a murderer and a thief.

We would like the question for us to be the same. "What sort of Saviour, King, Messiah do

you want ?" We are presented with the same dilemma. We are presented with the euphoria of our Salvation in the glories of the victory of the cross and the empty tomb, of the joy of Pentecost and the promise of eternal life. But it comes in the context of a King riding on a Donkey. It comes in the context of a Saviour who wants to delve the recesses of our hearts and to inspire us to service and humility as he modelled it.

It comes in the context of a Messiah who demands a response - a response in the form of love, love which always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres and never fails. Contrary to what we would like there are no areas of our faith which we can veto. We would like the question for us to be the same. "What sort of Saviour, King, Messiah do you want ?" But we have no choice. Along with Tim Rice we want to be able to ask the question *Do you think you are what we say you are?*

In other words we want to define who Jesus is by our requirements, by our presumptions of what he must be. If we reduce Jesus to our definitions then we are like the Crowds on Palm Sunday who retain the right to accept him and then spit him out for crucifixion because he doesn't fit our requirements. We reduce Jesus to a mere man.

But as CS Lewis said

*A man who was merely a man and said the sort of thing Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic- on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.'*

As we come to Easter - as we travel the road to the Cross and the Tomb, we are faced with a question. Along with the city and everybody ever since

"Who is this?"

Not "What sort of Saviour, King, Messiah do you want ?"

But this King on a Donkey, this man wearing a Crown of Thorns, this bleeding mess of humanity on a Cross, this is your God, as much as the one who rose from the dead and sits in Glory at the right hand of God. Can you accept him as all of these things as your Saviour, King and Messiah ?