

Sermon preached at St Andrew's Church Soham on 25th March 2018 – Palm Sunday

Mark 11:1-11, 15:1-39

“Truly this man was God’s Son!” – said the centurion. We end our gospel reading this morning where we started our earlier gospel reading, the story of Palm Sunday, with a declaration of who Jesus is. And what, I wonder, do we make of it?

In our earlier reading, people spread cloaks and branches on the ground before Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. There was historical significance to this: the tradition was that should the current king be given a ‘vote of no confidence’ by the people, a new king would be chosen, and would be proclaimed king in defiance of the existing king – by the new king’s followers spreading their cloaks under his feet as a sign of their loyalty and allegiance – a bit like rolling out the red carpet that’s usually reserved for the reigning monarch, to show that as far as you’re concerned, this person has taken their place. In this action, people were declaring their allegiance to Jesus as the new king.

They declared it in their words, too. “Hosanna! – blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” – that’s a royal hymn. They’d been waiting for years for someone who would lead them as King David did, who would be a special leader from God and make them God’s special people once more. And now, the crowd are saying that they believe that this is who Jesus is. They’re proclaiming him, not just as “king”, but as the King. They’re saying “This is the one we’ve been waiting for. He is from God!”

And “Truly,” said the centurion, “this man was God’s Son”.

There’s a lot that happens in between that Palm Sunday reading and the second reading we’ve just heard, and it’s worth taking a bit of time this week to read it, just those few chapters in Mark’s gospel, in order to see just what shapes the events of our second reading, to see how public opinion changes. Jesus is treated with worship and suspicion, with respect and contempt, with friendship and betrayal. He is declared a great teacher – and a blasphemer. He is proclaimed as the new king, the one from God, the one who can save them – and he is sentenced to death.

And then, at the point of his death, the centurion makes his declaration. A non-Jew, a Roman citizen who hasn’t been part of this great sweep of public opinion, who has nothing invested in it, who is there to enforce Roman rule and peace such as is possible in occupied territory, who is used to seeing such gruesome deaths as these – he watches, and declares “This man was God’s Son”.

I wonder who you would say Jesus is.

More importantly, I wonder what you do about it.

See, everything I’ve mentioned so far has been historical – the events of Jesus’ last few days, and people’s reactions to them. But we’re not here to preserve history. There’s something far more important going on. We heard it immediately before the centurion’s declaration. “When it was noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon... Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”

Why did Jesus have to die? That curtain in the temple shut off the most holy place in the temple, the place where God dwelt. The curtain separated it from the rest of the temple to keep people safe from coming into God’s holy presence unworthily. It could only be entered by the High Priest, and even then only once a year, and only with the blood from a sacrifice to atone for people’s sins. But when the curtain was torn in two, that

separation was removed. Now people could come directly into God's presence. God was still holy, and people were still sinful – but Jesus' death was the blood needed to atone for those sins, so that we could come directly to God.

As Jesus, the Son of God, hangs dying on that cross, there is darkness – as if creation itself is stopping to witness this barbaric and sacrificial act, this end of all that has gone before, this new beginning. And as Jesus dies, the barrier between us and God is destroyed. The God who loves us is making it possible for us to know that we are loved by God. The God who heals, who restores, who transforms, who nourishes, who has already tried so many things to maintain a relationship with his people, is now trying something new. The God who loves, who searches out, who disregards rules and conventions and expectations and boundaries, and who does whatever it takes to restore relationship with his beloved creation, does indeed do whatever it takes...

Why did Jesus have to die? When I was writing this sermon I had two different possible endings. One was to answer that question, "Why did Jesus have to die?" by giving some teaching to help explain it. I enjoy teaching. That was the easy ending. But it's not the right ending. Because interesting as it might be, talking about that keeps all of this on an intellectual level. And actually, this needs to be responded to on a practical level.

Jesus did die – to get rid of what separates us from God, so that we can be in relationship with the God who loves us enough to give his Son for us. So the important question is: Do we live as people who are loved by God? – valuing each other as God's loved creation, nurturing each other's gifts, caring for each other... do we even know that we are loved? Do we live as people who have been set free, in relationship with God? – maintaining that relationship, not out of a sense of obligation but because we want to spend time in God's presence, we want to come to know God more, we want to worship God, we want to live out the kingdom demonstrated by Jesus... Do we live as if Jesus is Lord? – we say it, we sing it, but do we do something about it? Is God our priority? Or do other things get in the way?

As you know, this building is in a state of disrepair. It needs a lot of work doing to it if it is to stay standing and useable. It is the focus of a lot of our attention at present and for some time to come – there is much effort being put into finding the funds and expertise to make this happen. And that's really important. But if I may say so, this is even more important. Because if we don't know that Jesus is God's Son, that Jesus is Lord – and live accordingly – then we are merely preserving history. And preserving history may well be important – but it's not our primary calling as Church, as the Body of Christ. We are called to be disciples and to make disciples, to live as God's loved, free people, in relationship with God, and to enable others to come into relationship with God too. That is our purpose and our calling.

"Truly", said the centurion, "this man was God's Son". But do we believe that? Because if so then it must have a consequence. God loves us and does whatever it takes to draw us back to him, even to the extent of allowing Jesus to die. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less. There are no lengths to which God won't go to be in relationship with us. And it doesn't depend on our understanding. That's how much he loves us.

So as we enter this Holy Week, and as you move forward together as a Church, let our attention be on Jesus, God's Son, destroying all that separates us from God; and let us learn to live as God's loved people, being and making disciples, knowing who we are, fulfilling our purpose and our calling. Amen.