

Palm Sunday Evensong Sermon. Rev James Shakespeare

True and humble king, hailed by the crowd as messiah: grant us the faith to know you and love you, that we may be found beside you – on the way of the cross, which is the path of glory. Amen

Today, Palm Sunday, we begin this most holy week; and, traditionally, we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, on a donkey, the crowds waving palm branches, to welcome their messiah king. Only we know that those same crowds are fickle, and will – a few days later – turn against him, and stand by (or even worse join with his accusers), as Jesus is sentenced by the political and religious establishment to be crucified, a criminal's death.

So this morning, at St John's, we already entered into the melee of Holy Week, remembering and re-enacting those sacred event – in the story of our salvation. We joined together, led by the children, in our Palm Procession, around Blinco Grove, and entering Jerusalem triumphant, with Hosanna's on our lips. But we also re-enacted, in anticipation of Holy Week as a whole, the entire Passion Drama from Matthew, a sneak pre-view, if you like, of what lies ahead this week, of all weeks- the journey to the Cross and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the sins of the whole world.

Well it's now evening, and already Jesus has entered Jerusalem; in Luke's account he has driven the money changers out of the holy Temple – a powerful act of prophetic symbolism – and the chief priests and scribes have already questioning Jesus' authority – they don't like a challenge to their power and self-interest, and in our NT lesson tonight, we hear Jesus' parable (addressed primarily to them) of the wicked tenants.

'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower; then he leased it to tenants, and went to another country...' (Matthew 21.33, setting the scene).

It is a remarkable powerful, telling and poignant parable. And parable, unlike earlier parables, in the heady days of his ministry in Galilee, is not about growth and life, but rather the opposite, opposition, rejection and death: the upcoming death of the king of glory, Jesus the Messiah King, God's beloved Son.

Jesus takes a familiar story, the song of the unfruitful vineyard from the early chapters of Isaiah's prophecy {the Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard, from Isaiah 5} – a love song about God planting a vineyard and watching over it, hoping for good graps, but discovering only wild grapes (a disturbing picture of what happens if the people of God persistently reject the purpose for which God has called them; which seems to happen, on and off, through the history of the OT).

But here Jesus tells the story differently, and gives is a subtle twist. God is still the vineyard-owner, and Israel is still the vineyard (as we are too, today). But God has been waiting, at a distance, lovingly and patiently addressing his people – for those with eyes and hearts to notice. He has sent the prophets, his slaves, some of whom have been beaten and others

killed. And finally God decides that he will send his own Beloved Son, 'Surely they will respect my Son'... But what is going to happen? Incredibly the authorities reject him too, and kill him, believing that the inheritance of the vineyard, then, will be theirs, to do with as they please.

And so we see, played out, or interpreted, in slow motion, the whole drama of Holy Week; of Jesus teaching, rejection, betrayal, arrest and crucifixion. And the parable adds a further metaphor into the mix, that of the architecture of the Temple:

'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.'

Words taken from the pilgrim Psalm, which those coming to Passover would sing, Psalm 118 verse 22. Yes, the one person – Jesus Christ – destined to be the cornerstone of God's new Temple, would be rejected and killed... and later, after his resurrection, he will become the cornerstone of the new Temple, his sacred Body – on earth and in heaven, the holy Church, of which we are all members.

So how does this dramatic parable speak to us, at the beginning of Holy Week? How does Jesus' warning about the vineyard, producing sour grapes and the tenants beating and rejecting those sent to it, speak to our Church, and or world today?

Well we know, tragically, that we still live in a world of violence and appalling cruelty? We still witness, all around the world, men and women being imprisoned for their faith, or for standing up for the cause of truth and justice. We know that women are, and have been, tragically abused by men; and men also violated, whether as victims of the modern slave trade, or economic exploitation, or worse. And we know that it's so easy for institutions, political and religious, to not listen and reject the prophets sent to them today.

Living as a Christian, in these confusing times, is not easy; and all of us will face times of trial and opposition, for humbly standing up for the truth, and doing the right thing...

But today, and this Holy Week, we can rejoice, because Jesus our King has gone on ahead of us; he has stayed the course, despite facing the ultimate sacrifice of death; and through his resurrection he is always with us, and strengths us to follow him, and to know the freedom of the sons and daughters of God... and what is more he invites us to bear fruitful, to be good stewards of his gifts, and to live – not as the world lives – but founded on that living cornerstone, which is Jesus himself, our rock and our salvation. + Within this, rooted in Christ, rooted in prayer, word and worship, all that matters is that we seek to remain faithful, and always do the next thing, loving God & neighbour, and walking day by day in the footsteps of our Saviour.

So may we, this Holy Week and in all the days ahead, remain faithful, know his mercy and grace, and deign to share in his redeeming work, loving and proclaiming and serving him, in one another, in our neighbours, in the church, and in our world today.

Let us pray: *True and humble king, hailed by the crowd as messiah: grant us the faith to know you and love you, that we may be found beside you – on the way of the cross, which is the path of glory. + Amen*