

Reflection on Matthew 21.1-11
Moderator Richard Bott
for Palm Sunday 2020

We are coming into one of the times in our calendar that for me is so very important. It's a time of story. It's a time of action. It's a time of teaching and life and death. It's one of the most human times of Jesus' existence - one of the most human times of that story that we have in the Gospels.

I find it kind of fun, in the scripture that we had from the gospel, today, because as Jesus comes into the city – to fulfil the prophecy, the narrator tells us that Jesus was riding on BOTH a cold and a donkey. The picture that I have of that is that he's just a little bit stretched, trying to ride both at the same time, into the city. One of the things I do love about scripture is that, when we read it, we do get these images that make us say, "Wait... what?!"

For me, Palm Sunday, that day where we remember people grabbing things that were around them – Palm Branches, cloaks and (oh, here, I've got my tea towel) – and waving them around, shouting, "Hey! Look who is coming! Hosanna!" Then throwing them down on the ground, as a way for someone who was seen to be really special to be honoured.

Seeing those images in my head – images of hope and celebration of a prophet coming, a prophet who seemed to be even more than a prophet (maybe even the Messiah, someone who was going to come and save the people of Jerusalem and all of Israel from the oppression of the Romans!) – is powerful.

People had pretty high hopes.

People had pretty high expectations of what Jesus was going to do.

We know, from that day, before the end of the week, those same crowds moved from celebrating and being hopeful and joyful, and so ready for their world to change; to a place where they were yelling, "Crucify him. Crucify him!" - a place where they were ready to kill.

I've often wondered how it was that people could move so quickly from that place of celebration to that place of anger and fear. The last few weeks have been illuminating about how quickly life can move, and communal emotions can change. Things are changing, sometimes day to day, sometimes hour to hour; we have new messages, new directives, new rules. We find ourselves needing to only have 50 people together, then 30, then 10, then 2 – all at least 2 meters away from each other. I'm watching a world where what's "normal" changes, moment by moment.

It helps me to understand, in that place where things feel so chaotic, about how people could move from celebration to fear in a snap. A place where hopes are that things are going to be fulfilled, to a place where fear overwhelms, fear turns to anger, and anger turns to violence. I can understand it better, because I think we are living in a world where – unless we are so very, very careful – fear can become panic, and panic can cause us to react in ways that we would never expect. In ways that aren't about love, and life, and hope.

Jesus constantly called people out of places of fear – constantly called people to not be afraid. Constantly called people to be in their faith, to recognize that in the relationship that they had with God, they didn't need to fear. That's one of the things that I'm holding on to in all of the changes that

we're facing right now. That in the moment to moment, if I can remember to love – to love God with all that I am, to love myself with all that I am, to love you with all that I am – then that puts fear into a different place. As Christian community, as people who truly care, we can get past that place of fear. We can get past the crowd that shouts, "Oh NO! The world is coming to an end!" We can get to a place of hope, and life. Not just for ourselves, but for the world.

So, for me, in this Holy Week in the midst of Covid-19, I am looking for all of those places that call us out of our fear, and into our hope. I'm looking for the leaders, I'm looking for the children, I'm looking for the people who are saying, "Take a breath. Fear not!" I'm looking for God speaking through all of these places, all of these people.

Over this week, we will come to a place of recognizing the time where Jesus went to the upper room with his disciples, and shared in a meal of hope and wonder. We will come to a place where we will walk with Jesus to Golgotha, to the cross. And we'll get to a place where we walk past the death, and into life, and into hope, again.

So, as we journey with one another and with Jesus, I hope we'll keep our eyes on the hope. I hope we'll keep our eyes on the wonder and the love. And I hope that we will remind ourselves – "Don't be afraid. God's love is stronger. Stronger than our fear."

Amen.