

Sermon on Luke 19: 28-40

The Anti-respectability Gospel

So we move to the penultimate moment. The prelude to the main event. The journey of Lent has built and built and as Jesus enters Jerusalem his and our destiny comes in view. The final act. The closing scene. What began with Jesus resisting the devil's temptations now approaches its climax. Jesus' final performance will not be on a stage. It will not be under lights. It will not be in front of adoring crowds with shouts of encore. Rather he will be left alone on a cross because for Rome would be Kings are a deadly serious business. All along Jesus has brought life – life in healing, in service, in love and compassion, life in friendship and hospitality – and for all this giving he receives a death sentence. It just isn't right or fair. That's one part we can understand at least. That sounds exactly like the world we know. Yet Jesus doesn't complain or protest as we might. In fact far from thinking about himself, at the final point, at the last word, he is offering assurance to a crucified criminal who hasn't done a good thing in his whole life. The man for others. The God for others. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. God gave. God gives. Today the Messiah of sacrifice, of suffering, rides into the Holy City and all bets are off. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords arrives, but on a colt not a stallion and there are murmurs. The clouds and the crowds are gathering. And soon the disciples will scatter and it will left to the one. For Jesus, for us, Palm Sunday is the beginning of the end.

Jesus' entry into the city continues a pattern and a theme we have witnessed in our readings over these past few weeks. Jesus walks the way of love once more and it pays little heed to respectability. The Good news of God is not concerned with worldly protocol in its mission of redemption. And indeed it is in this very indifference to human respectability that the most powerful gestures of God's Kingdom are offered; that the Kingdom is proclaimed in its most vivid colours. A prodigal father runs out to his repentant returning son and throws a party for him as his elder son complains bitterly. A woman pours out a perfume worth a year's wages on Jesus' feet, wiping his feet with her hair, while one of Jesus' own cynically decries the apparent waste. And today Jesus parades into the holy city and his followers declare, 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.', while some in the crowd murmur and grumble. Who does this upstart think that he is riding into town like a king? In each case

respectability is thrown out the window. Taboos are broken. Cultures are transcended, all in the name of love. Of course Jesus' death is the ultimate challenge of God's love to benign respectability. There could not be a more humiliating, more public, more desolate way to die. And this was the Son of God, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. This is the length to which God goes to redeem us from ourselves and from the forces of evil that would pull us down. When the deeper issues are upon us, when pain and suffering, despair and death converge, convention suddenly seems a lesser concern. And we may ask ourselves, is keeping up appearances really the most important thing in life?

It's funny really because from the beginning God has thrown caution to the wind when it comes to earthly convention. Human systems and assumptions as to how things should go are confounded. A King born in a stable to a peasant girl. An early life lived in a Galilean backwater. The calling of fishermen and tax collectors. The healing of lepers with touch. The honouring of women and children. Respectability can be a convenient cover for all kinds of injustices. God finds a different way and cares little so it seems for our worldly distinctions. I was reading a reflection by a lady with cancer not so long ago. She was graciously sharing the wisdom she was acquiring as she found herself facing the prospect of death. And much of it was about moving beyond respectability to the place of deep connection and love. 'Don't worry', she said, 'if the children draw on the walls.' Seems about right. Don't let your respectability get in the way of grace, of reaching out, of compassion. Don't worry if the children draw on the walls, or if a father runs out to meet his son, or a woman anoints Jesus' feet, or the King rides into the Holy City on a donkey. See the deeper meaning and hold to that, for that is where you will find God. The 16th C Anglican Martyr Hugh Latimer was preaching one day and noticed that the King, Henry the VIII was present. He said, 'Latimer, the king is here; be careful what you say.', he then went on to say, 'Latimer, the king of kings is here, be careful what you say.'

We do respectability pretty well around here. We have our conventions and expectations. We like to think of ourselves as a respectable community, and that's okay. But today we are challenged to think how Jesus' triumphal entry, subverting convention and respectability, might push us to look beneath the veneer of our lives and customs to the place of deeper love and

engagement. We shy away from possible embarrassment or exposure, understandably. We prefer the safety of retreat into ourselves where no one can judge us, perhaps, we think, even God. We are like the child playing hide and seek. If God finds us, that's okay, but we're not coming out of our hiding place, our place of safety walled off from the world for anyone or anything. We crouch down behind any number of pretences which we think will insulate us from the risk of freely and publicly and unreservedly being a people of faith. Better to say nothing at all than risk saying the wrong thing. Better to do nothing at all than risk being embarrassed. But today Jesus is the Father running out to the son, he is Mary offering her anointing, he is the King of peace riding into the city of conflict, and he is Lord of all riding into our lives and calling us to a different way. We may follow Jesus into the city on the way to the cross, risking the public taunts, the jeers, perhaps even risking death itself. Or we may retreat to our comfortable certainties and hide behind our walls of respectability. The trouble is, for each of us, as for Jesus, the time will come when we too are faced with the prospect of death, and we may find ourselves reflecting on what kind of life we've led. On who we have been in faith. On what our words and lives and actions have proclaimed... the thief on the cross found salvation in his final moments, but that was enough. We are fortunate to be able to live here and now and come to Jesus today, that we might live changed lives tomorrow and forever.

Today we see Jesus' last great public act before the cross itself. Today is the prelude to the final drama of Easter. And as always there is hope to be found in the triumphal entry if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. But it is not a hope that will offer us settled comfort in the respectable routines of our existence. It is a disruptive hope which cares more for love given and received than it ever will for our clinging to worldly appearances. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could be that way too by faith? Do this faithfully, with imagination and compassion and we will find there is hope for us as well.

“For in this way there is always hope for the people of the cross for the darkness leads to the dawn, the night to the day, and death gives way to life, forevermore, Amen.”