

Reflections for Lent 2021 – Why did Jesus die? Session 1.

Based on 'Journey to the Empty Tomb' by Paula Gooder, Canterbury Press, 2014

"*Journey to the Empty Tomb*' explores the events leading up to the first Easter that lie at the very heart of the Christian faith. It focuses on the accounts in the four Gospels of Jesus' final week, beginning with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and ending with the resurrection. Using her extensive biblical knowledge, Paula Gooder opens up the New Testament texts to reveal fresh and striking insights into many familiar stories, including the cleansing of the temple, the widow's offering, the cursing of the fig tree, the last supper, Jesus' arrest and trial, the crucifixion, the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances." So says the blurb on the back cover of the book.

Read Mark 11.1-10 – 'The account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem marks the moment when his death begins to look inevitable and unavoidable.' But to what extent was Jesus' entry really triumphal? His ministry was not complete and he didn't enjoy overwhelming support from the crowds. The traditional title of this story reminds us of the true nature of the triumph: that God's understanding of a triumph is light years away from our own – something we need to remember when we ask 'Why did Jesus die?'

This is a different kind of triumph, symbolised in the creature that Jesus sends the disciples to procure and chooses to ride on – a humble donkey. If you read the story in Matthew's Gospel (21.1-11) you will discover that Jesus sat on a donkey and a colt, which must have been a bit of a challenge! In Jesus' entry into Jerusalem there are echoes of stories about victorious Roman generals, but they rode a white horse and the audience was forced into attendance. Within Jewish tradition there are echoes also, 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.' (Zechariah 9.9). Again in Zechariah, 'On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley...' (Zech.14.4). Mark tells us that Jesus got on the donkey near the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem. Many in the Jewish crowd, struggling under Roman rule, would have known well the biblical references and begun to believe that Jesus was the longed-for king-like figure who had come to redeem his people.

The people shouted, 'Hosanna!' and spread cloaks and leafy branches before Jesus, as they would before a king (2 Kings 9.13). Did you know that the word 'hosanna' is used only here in our English bible translations? And only in Matthew, Mark and John's accounts. Luke always avoids the use of Hebrew. In Hebrew the word is also used in Psalm 118.25, which is translated in our English bibles. In the gospels the word is left in Hebrew because they break off from their usual Greek to quote in Hebrew, and our translators have followed their example. At the time of Jesus Psalm 118 was popular as a psalm expressing the future hope of Israel's coming salvation by a future Davidic king-like figure. For the crowd living in C1 AD Jerusalem it suddenly seemed obvious who Jesus was.

Jesus entered Jerusalem surrounded by crowds, but the crowds quickly melted away. The human attention span was as poor then as it is today. People needed to find their accommodation, some food, their friends. Human beings are easily distracted, even from the most important news and people. We ourselves are easily distracted from our faith. It is hard to keep focussed even for 5 minutes in prayer or meditation. No wonder people in our community struggle to hear the good news we want to share with them. But that shouldn't stop us trying to speak of God's love for the world. Sometimes people need repetition to really grasp the meaning of words, or the coming together of words and circumstances in their lives, or sometimes actions speak louder than words.

- Do you think 'triumphal entry' is a good title for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem? Is there another?
- What do you think Jesus thought was going on?