

Palm Sunday: God's unrest

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

Mile after uphill mile, it seems a long way even today in a car, let alone on foot, or riding on a donkey. You wind up through the sandy hills from Jericho, the lowest point on the face of the earth, through the Judean desert, climbing all the way. Halfway up, you reach sea level; you've already climbed a long way from the Jordan valley; you still have to ascend and get up and over the Mount of Olives from Bethany and then down the acclivitous slope passed Gethsemane and down into the city of Jerusalem. It's almost always hot, since it seldom ever rains.

That was the way the pilgrims from Galilee came on that first Palm Sunday, with Jesus amongst them, as He had planned all along. This was to be the climax of His story, of His public career, of His vocation. He knew well enough what was likely to lie ahead and had set His face to go and meet it head on. He couldn't stop announcing the reality and the requirements of God's Kingdom - of loving-kindness and sacrifice, of an awareness of and sensitivity to the world around and its people. Of God's plan to heal and to save, and to face down the forces of evil and so continue the constantly evolving and transforming work of God, through God's people, in our broken, frightened and fractious world.

Down the pilgrims go, that steep path to the Kidron Valley, singing part of the great praise Psalm 118, about opening gates, and God defeating enemies, and establishing peace from heaven itself.

They spread their cloaks along the road for Jesus, and wave tree branches in greeting.

And yet...the grumblers are still there; some religious lawyers and teachers going along with the crowd suddenly becoming anxious about what will happen if the authorities in Jerusalem think another insurrection is about to begin.ⁱ The disciples, or at least one of them, Judas, fearing the

crowds were getting too loud and would jeopardise all that Jesus had achieved in the last three years, and the hope He represented be snuffed out.

In the midst of it, serene, calm, watching, listening, saying not a word, Jesus, riding on a donkey. I wonder - what was going through the mind of the One we believe to be the Son of God. Was His mind calm and serene? Or was there unrest? We must be brave indeed to wonder at what was going through the mind of Jesus on Palm Sunday. But what did He hear and see that we can guess, for there is plenty of evidence. What was He feeling and what was He thinking? And could it be that the divine unrest from God the Father was being embodied in God the Son, being fanned by God the Spirit. And if Jesus' mind was filled with unrest then, should we, seeing and hearing things that are similar, feel unrest today?

All His ministry Jesus had been watching and hearing, feeling and thinking, and doing. Putting what He *believed* into what He *did*. He was the physical embodiment of what Martin Luther King once said: *"Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate (people) with God but to integrate (people) with (others) and each (person) with (themselves)."*

In His Kingdom-call to His followers: to love God, and to love your neighbour as yourself; do you think there was a sense of unrest in Jesus as He looked around and saw that it was not happening enough? As it was then, is it still the same now?

If Jesus were to ride through the bleak streets of 2026 and look around, what unrest would fill His heart and mind? Life's most persistent and urgent question remains, *'What are you doing for others?'*

If Jesus were to ride through the streets of the United Kingdom, and look around at the number of people living in relative poverty in our country. 13.4 million people, with 4 million children, and

1.69 million pensioners, with questions about how successive Governments have failed, north and south of the Border, to make any significant inroad; would unrest fill His heart and mind? Would Jesus share Martin Luther King's observation: *"Why should there be hunger and deprivation in any land, in any city, at any table, when (humanity) has the resources and the scientific know-how to provide all (humanity) with the basic necessities of life? There is no deficit in human resources. The deficit is in human will."* In a few weeks' time there will be an election in Scotland. Will this great challenge feature in our debates, or will it be the dismally predictable slanging match between political parties we often witness? And will we, with unrest in our hearts and minds, hold all aspiring politicians to account before and after the election?

If Jesus were to ride through the fear-filled streets of Tehran, and Beirut, and Gaza, and Kyiv, and Khartoum, and look around, what unrest would fill His heart and mind? We live in a world of misguided missiles, and misguided men. Would Jesus share Martin Luther King's observation: *"When evil (people) plot, good (people) must plan. When evil (people) burn and bomb, good (people) must build and bind. When evil (people) shout ugly words of hatred, good (people) must commit themselves to the glories of love."* What would Jesus have made of the speech made recently by Marco Rubio, the United States Secretary of State, who stated that: *"...this war will make the world safer."* Would Jesus see it as a shameless lie? Is it the case that this war has radicalised an entire generation of Iranians, and others, to hate the west even more than they did before, while the Iranian regime either gets more hardline or collapses into chaos? Would Jesus see, with unrest in His heart, that this illegal war has made the world vastly more dangerous, and its economies on every continent more unstable? Will the leaders of NATO and elsewhere continue to resolve to seek peace with justice, and model moral decency which tolerates neither

totalitarianism in Tehran, nor hubris in the White House? The heart of God, the heart of Jesus, is surely filled with unrest today.

If Jesus were to ride through Morningside today, what would He see, what would He hear? An Easter tree decorated that speaks of hope not only to Church but to Community? An umbrella-fund-raising project supported by Church and Community, alongside a call to review giving to the Church generally. Not just for the fabric of our building, but for the fabric of our faith which infuses this building with welcome and inclusion and generosity and kindness and attempts in these tough days for the Church to radiate hope into a world that needs these things more than anything else? Would He see a Church serving a community, helping people living with dementia, or helping those facing the realities of death and bereavement, or helping those making music in a discordant time, or bringing beauty through flowers? Would Jesus get to the treacle scones at the Jam and Baking Stall in time? And a carrot for the donkey?

Sometimes, just sometimes, the unrestful heart of Jesus finds rest when He turns a corner and finds people trying to follow Him and trying to be like Him and trying to put His love into action. Not that we should be smug, or rest on laurels, but nor should we, along with others, downplay the immeasurable good that is being done today to make this community, and this city, and many places in our world a better place. Despite everything. Because of everything. Here were we build bridges and not walls. Here where we sometimes must accept finite disappointment, we never lose infinite hope.

What gives God cause for unrest in our world, in our lives, today? And where, do you think, God might find rest, and hope, and rest in our world, and in our lives today?

On this Palm Sunday, the steady clip-clop of the hooves of a humble donkey echo across the world. For Jesus is still, on the beast of burden, on the move. Watching, hearing, thinking, feeling.

Wondering if, however fleetingly, we might just about get it right, and just about be doing something to ease not only the promise but the reality of God's Kingdom into the world now. In our world today viewed through the self-regarding narcissism of a selfie-stick, vanity asks, is it popular? Politics asks, will it work? But conscience and morality asks, is it right?ⁱⁱ

Listen. The steady clip-clop of donkey hooves echoes now through the unrest of our Church, our world, our lives.

They're getting closer and they are inviting you to follow on, this Palm Sunday, the road through Holy Week. To challenging, and serving, and sharing bread and wine, and washing feet, and betrayal, and crucifixion, and death, and darkness, and beyond. Beyond. To Easter, and light, and hope, and rest.

Clip...Clop... He's here.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone, in The Little Book of Lent, pps 129-131*

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King