

Sunday, April 9, 2017

Psalm 118 (837 VU Pt 1,3,4)

Matthew 21 :1-11

John 12 :12-16

Fear of Conquest

This is Palm Sunday, the sixth Sunday of Lent and our journey through this season which leads to Holy Week continues. Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week when we remember the actions, words and events which lead to Jesus' death by crucifixion. This Passion Story of Jesus is foundational to our faith as His followers and so when gather this week to remember Jesus' passion and death let us also acknowledge those things which cause us to wonder, and to pray as we seek answers for the fears we might have.

Our Lenten theme has been "Freedom from Fear" and as first stated a few weeks ago, in order to gain freedom from our fears, we need to name them. Today our focus is on the fear of conquest. Those who followed Jesus for up to 3 years placed their future, their hope and their lives in His hand. He has taught them well and now the people are rejoicing and praising Jesus with shouts of Hosanna because they believe he is the promised messiah, sent from God. But they are unsure of what it all meant at the time when Jesus entered the city.

Zechariah and OT prophet wrote about the coming of Zion's King. Zion being the city of Jerusalem and the region in which Israel the chosen people of God lived. This prophecy had been written years in advance that the promised messiah would come but it would not occur until several generations later. This messiah would be made known to others because he would be righteous, and have salvation; and also be gentle and kind. The people would know him because they would have listened to his teachings about God and how we are to love each other.

Centuries later, Jesus came and he taught about God's kingdom and about eternal life. He healed people and performed miracles. Being raised as a Jew and knowing of the importance of this feast and the crowds it drew into the city, Jesus had two disciples make preparations for Zechariah's prophecy to be fulfilled. Jesus would enter the city of Jerusalem and he would ride on a donkey- a colt, a foal of a donkey. Jesus also told his closest friends that he would die in Jerusalem and so when the time came they should understand. But they did not

for even though they believed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Rabbi the teacher sent from God, they questioned why he had to die.

Matthew records what occurred that day by stating that 'when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." The crowd of followers shouted "Hosanna" as Jesus rode by because they believed that Jesus would save them from tyranny, oppression and sin. John describes this scene a little differently.

John writes that the great crowd which had come for the Feast of the Passover had heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him and shouted. But what is interesting is that the disciples did not understand what was happening at first. Who were these people who had heard about Jesus and what were they doing with branches? Did they understand something that John and the disciples did not?

What exactly were the people hoping to be saved from? Why were they afraid and needing to be saved? The Roman government practised accepting all religious believers and philosophical teachings with the government systems reflecting the larger Roman system. There was freedom to worship, but there was also strict control. Jews held distrust for the Roman Empire and were subjected to living under Roman control even though they could live their own way. Jewish law was recognized through their own court system (Sanhedrin) yet had to relinquish to Roman rule if seeking a death penalty.

As Jesus rides into Jerusalem he knows the local history of Jerusalem and the region. This area had been the site of many uprisings where the oppressed were conquered and control was lost. Often the Jewish people were the victims and so as Jesus enters the city he identifies himself as the messiah the One sent from God as the one who would save the people. Jerusalem at the time is crowded. There are many Jewish visitors coming to celebrate the Feast of the Passover, a commemoration of the time when Pharaoh released the Hebrews from slavery. But there are also other celebrations and gatherings as well. The city is home to a diverse population and people in power are wanting to display it when the streets were full. This might include military, shop owners and anyone looking to be seen and heard by the crowds.

Jesus' reputation had spread and those people who became followers of Jesus saw in him a leader who was kind and willing to listen and love. But what does this mean for them as

Jesus knowing the prophecy of the OT fulfilled it by riding a donkey. The disciples are not sure what is happening as the crowd grows larger. But the people who witnessed the raising of Lazarus from death have been telling the story. People are meeting Jesus as he comes into the city because they had heard about him; they did not know him, but only wanted to see him for themselves. But it is the Pharisees- the key leaders within the Jewish synagogues and traditions who take note about the crowds who are following Jesus. They state, "See this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him." They are threatened by Jesus' popularity even though they have the power. Jesus has the people with him and many believed that he was the Chosen One, the Messiah, the One Israel had longed for. The Jewish people no longer wanted to live in fear of conquest, so the sight of Jesus riding was the most welcome sign of God's promise being fulfilled.

Living in Canada we don't live with the fear of conquest in the political sense, but as individuals each of us does live with different levels of fear in our lives. Sometimes those fears and anxieties become so great they threaten to overtake us. But we need not be afraid! We have been singing and hearing the word "Hosanna" this morning—Save us. What is it that you want to be saved from? Healed? Or renewed by? What is it that Jesus can do for you to help you in your daily living? Are you afraid and why?

Paul writes to the Romans (8:28-38) If God in Christ is for us who can be against us? God gave us Jesus and so if we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love and believe in him, then what are we afraid of? The people lining the streets that day as Jesus rode by were filled with anxiety, hope, wonder, curiosity and some truly believed him to be the Son of God. They weren't sure whether they wanted to be known as his followers and they were not fully sure of what would happen.

Some only wanted to meet the celebrity prophet. If they had cell phones and the internet most of the crowd would have taken pictures with Jesus and posted them with caption, "Yes I met Jesus!" and then simply walked away. Several would have been caught up in the moment—this is the Messiah? Why isn't he riding something more dignified than a donkey? But the disciples did not fully understand until later on yet they stayed with Jesus and did what he had asked.

What are we afraid of today? Terrorism, destruction, lack of providing the necessities of life, that peace will never occur, that the future is uncertain? There seems to be a lot, yet as

Paul says, "We cannot be separated from the love of Christ. If we really believe he is the Messiah who came, rode that donkey and took our place so that we might be forgiven of all sin. We belong to him and in spite of those things which might cause us to be afraid we are more than conquerors of all of them because of Jesus' love for us. Nothing can separate us—our relationship with God in Christ Jesus is secure as long as we have and maintain our faith and believe!

In the crowd that day as Jesus rode the donkey were the disciples who had been called to follow him and they did throughout the 3 years of his ministry. There were also those who had witnessed his miracles, those who had listened to him on the hillside, at the beach, and at the Jordan River. There were those who could not publicly show that they believed because of their position in the Roman rule or in the synagogue and there were those who just wanted to say that they saw him and walked away. Today as we begin this Holiest Week of the Christian year, where are you in the crowd—wanting to get a selfie? Or with the disciples who stayed until they were afraid of their lives? As we read and hear and listen to the story of Jesus' Passion let us be mindful of Jesus at the table; in prayer, and even when faithfully shout Hosanna. Save us/ me.