

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Before Procession: St. Mark 11: 1-11

Psalms 31: 9-16

Palm Sunday 2024.

Philippians 2: 5-11

St. Mark 15: 1-39

“And being found in human form, [the Lord] humbled himself, and became obedient to death.”
Philippians 2: 8a

Recently, I had the privilege of watching a local high school put on a production of the rock musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*... A large part of the musical is taken up with the imagined conflict between Jesus Christ and the apostle Judas, who (as we know), betrayed the Lord... As the composer presents the conflict, Judas accuses Jesus that who he *is* matters more than what he *says*... For Judas in this musical, the identity of Jesus has begun to matter more than Jesus’ message...

As all good plays, books or songs should, that got me thinking... Should we divide what Jesus *said* from who he *is*?... I don’t think we should make that division... I think who Jesus Christ is, and what he says and does, are always meant to be kept together. We take the message of the gospel seriously, because we understand that Jesus is expressing *God’s* thoughts, God’s priorities...

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week. The week will end with our observance of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, and his glorious resurrection from death. (We can’t have one without the other...) But, perhaps a bit surprisingly, the week begins by recalling the exuberant crowd of believers. Their joy cannot be contained! As the Lord Jesus is entering Jerusalem (where he will shortly be sentenced to death), the crowd shouts the ancient cry, “Hosanna! Hosanna!” “Hosanna” comes from the root of an ancient Hebrew word, meaning “salvation...” It is a cry of praise!... The Hebrews offer it here in the context of meeting Jesus Christ himself, whom we believe to be worthy of all praise and honour...

A short time from now, we will remember that the cry of the crowd changes from “Hosanna” to “Crucify him! Crucify him!” But for today, they – and we – are united in praise, and adoration...

Let’s focus in on Jesus – as we always should: The Lord Jesus is riding a donkey colt... It’s a humble little animal. We need to pay attention to this: Jesus Christ, who is worthy of all the praise, doesn’t come riding a great stallion. He doesn’t come riding on a chariot. He’s riding a donkey colt. Many of us see the ancient prophecy of Zechariah being fulfilled, of the coming King, who will ride on a donkey colt. As we so often sing this day, “Ride on, ride on, in majesty...”

I've been told that in ancient Palestine, teachers would also often ride donkeys. The best teachers, I think, are not those who are concerned about their own status or privilege, but humble. Good teachers are those who desire to help their listeners and students to be enriched with the knowledge of God's truth...

In today's second reading, Paul lays out the theme of the humility... First, Paul tells his brothers and sisters to be humble: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

The aim is for the Philippians – and us to follow the example of the humility of the Lord Jesus. Paul continues,

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

We are to be humble. Jesus himself was humble... This means it's part of the nature of God himself to be humble. God – who surely has nothing he needs to be humble about – is humble; gracious; and merciful... Humility is part of the character of God, shown in the behaviour of Jesus... The supreme example of Jesus' humility is his death on the cross, for sinners like you, and like me...

So we are called to be humble, after the example of Jesus... Yet, what does it *mean* to be humble, anyway?...

True humility, I suggest, is seeing ourselves as we truly are... Not, how we hope we will be. Not, the way other people see us – because other's people's vision is always incomplete. Other people might want to put us on a pedestal that we don't deserve. Alternatively, other people might want to put us down, but don't really know what is going on in our hearts and lives... True humility is seeing ourselves as we truly are. True humility is seeing ourselves as *God* sees us – God who can see the very depths of our hearts, and who knows us better than we know ourselves...

True humility means not carrying pride – “Look how much better I am than you are! I’m a Christian and you aren’t. I’m superior to you!” That is pride, not humility...

Conversely, true humility doesn’t mean that we have to think that we are all perfectly awful either – to pretend that we are like snakes on the floor, wringing our hands, and being happy to tell everyone we meet what awful people we must be! That’s not true humility either – that’s being obsequious, oily and squeaky...

True humility is seeing ourselves as we truly are, but not becoming self-focused in an unhealthy way. Do we recall how Jesus Christ taught us, that we are to love God with all our being, and to love our neighbours as ourselves?... Part of the process of humility is to turn from focusing unduly on ourselves, to focusing on God and others – pouring love into this world, and building Christ’s kingdom...

The Christian writer C. S. Lewis, who is known for his snappy quotes, once wrote, “True humility is not thinking less of yourself. It means thinking about yourself less.” The truly humble man, Lewis goes on to write, is one who is cheerfully interested in other people, and directs his care outward, toward them...

I suggest that it’s no accident that the scriptures invite us to examine our own humility, in light of Christ’s humility, on Palm Sunday, which is so full of God’s praises!... Recalling God’s goodness and mercy and magnificence is a way to turn from ourselves, to seeing what God has done for us, and his continued works of grace in our lives... Left to ourselves, in fact, we have lots to be humble about. Yet God in his mercy stretched out his loving arms on the cross. In his humility, God the Son died for us, to purchase our forgiveness, our freedom; world without end.

Amen.