**Sermon Palm Sunday A**

Sunday 5th April 2020.

Psalm 118: 1-3, 19-29. Matthew 21:1-11,

David Poultney

All over the World humour is coming to the help of people in lock down, people who are fearful, anxious and uncertain about the ravages of the virus and what might be left of their livelihoods when it is over. Part of this humour is finding silver linings to the cloud and one often said in Britain at the moment is; “well at least no one is talking about Brexit.” The rancour and division are put aside, for now, as people are preoccupied with the simple task of survival.

It seems an age ago but when Tony Blair came into power it was thought the United Kingdom would become a more whole hearted member of the EU, I begin with a story from Tony Blair’s autobiography, about his first European Union summit as British Prime minister.

These summits are held every six months in whichever country holds the EU presidency at the time. The Dutch held it when he was elected so his first summit meant a trip to the Netherlands and attendance at a state banquet held by Queen Beatrix. He arrived early and wandered into the state dining room here he saw a host of servants presided over by matronly woman in an apron setting out vases of flowers; clearly the housekeeper. Having a bit of time on his hands he goes over to the servants and starts making small talk, eventually he decides he should head back to the drawing room to chat with his fellow leaders but before he goes he thinks he should introduce himself to the housekeeper. After all it’s something she can tell her grandchildren, that she met Tony Blair. So he says “Well I must go,” and then offers his hand and says “By the way, I’m Tony Blair, the Prime minister of Great Britain.”

“Oh I know Mr Blair” she says taking his hand “and I’m the Queen of the Netherlands.”

There are certain things one does only once, and I’m sure this little *faux pas* came into that category.

Today on Palm Sunday we are confronted by a question of recognition. Who recognises Jesus as he enters into Jerusalem, who then holds fast to this over the next few days as the shadows lengthen and the inevitability of Jesus’s arrest and death loom ever nearer. Who greets him as messiah? Who plots against him as a threat?

Palm Sunday services often start in such a jolly way don’t they? Especially in churches with a number of children. Greenery is waved, maybe there is a procession, there is a cute story about a donkey. Today we may well feel a pang that on a day when we place ourselves in the crowd welcoming Jesus we must do so in ones and twos. But amid the colour and festivity of a traditional Palm Sunday service we can easily forget that this is also Passion Sunday, when we are challenged to begin reflecting in earnest on the suffering and death that await Jesus in the coming week.

Something which becomes virtually inevitable when Jesus arrives to acclaim in Jerusalem.

We often imagine Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as a triumphal procession. No doubt he arrived to acclaim and the highly structured way the story of his arrival is told is full of resonance with the First Testament accounts of prophets and kings. Yet look at the story, Jesus arrives on a donkey accompanied by his rag tag bunch of followers from the Galilee. They arrive to acclamation. Cheers, acclaim. People cry out in joy and acclaim him as messiah. Yet for all that, when you see what else was going on in Jerusalem at the same time then Jesus’s procession feels a bit like a losers’ parade.

It was just before Passover, Jerusalem was about to be overwhelmed by Jews from near and far there to celebrate Passover, to tell again their story of freedom from slavery in Egypt and to declare God’s redemption as a present reality. Now this is heady stuff, a subject people get together to celebrate an earlier liberation. It gave them ideas, it got them grumbling about their subjugation under Rome. Some hothead was bound to declare himself to be messiah, king of the Jews anointed by God to kick the Romans out. Would be messiahs were commonplace. Now Rome cared little about what its subjects believed but they found the Jews and their religion difficult. And would be messiahs, kings in waiting were a clear and present danger to the *Pax Romana*; yet there was a simple way to deal with them, nothing a couple of pieces of wood and a few nails couldn’t sort out.

There were always some Roman soldiers stationed in Jerusalem but at festival time, especially at Passover so a reinforcements marched into Jerusalem from Caesarea Maritima, a Roman settlement– a home away from home – on the coast. Now imagine hundreds of Roman soldiers, marching over the cobbles, imagine the spectacle of polished metal and leather, of helmets with plumes, of horses and at the head of the procession Pontius Pilate in a chariot and behind him the imperial eagle standard of the legion.

It must have been magnificent, but when word of their arrival spread palm branches were not waved, there were no shouts of acclamation. Instead children would have been dragged indoors and shutters would have been closed. The purpose of this display wasn’t to entertain the natives, it was to instil in them fear, it said “don’t even think about it.” This was naked raw power yet though it clearly had the upper hand it could not tolerate any rival, not even that north country preacher and his rag tag bunch of fans.

Theologians often talk of the power of Empire. Now we know what an empire is, many of us remember when much of the map of the World was coloured British red and French green. Such empires leave legacies and those are often mixed. The general fondness New Zealanders – pakeha New Zealanders have anyway – for our British heritage is not much reciprocated by the people of Ireland. The city of Dublin early in the early days of independence retiring a statue of Queen Victoria to the waters of Dublin Bay, not much love lost there I think.

An Empire can be a great power and its territories but it can be – theologically speaking –any system which commands our total, unquestioning obedience. So yes it might be the state, but it might be an ideology, it could be communism or capitalism – and listening to some American politicians say that the death of some vulnerable elderly people is a price worth paying for getting the economy back to normal shows us how monstrous an empire of ideas can be.

Yet challenging every empire comes Jesus and his followers, offering instead of empire the vision of humanity we call the kingdom of God.

Today the Empire and the Kingdom both come to town, one inviting our participation one demanding our submission. The choice is ours, today and every day. Amen