

Introduction

Someone asked me this week what Easter would be like this year? And the answer is “very strange indeed”. Perhaps like no other Easter in the history of the Christian church, will churches will be so empty and deserted, as they will be around the world this year.

The celebration of Jesus’ death and resurrection is the high point of the Christian year. But this year it will be very different as we celebrate at home and in some cases by ourselves.

We must not miss this moment to see what new insights and new perspectives emerge. Perhaps as we prepare this week, a more focussed and quiet time of reflection on the passion of Christ, will be ours. And I invite you to embrace this unusual season and see what the Lord has in store.

Some resources for the week are available on our website, and we invite you to journey with us, on the pathway to the cross and the empty tomb this week. We will remind you again at the end of the service.

But of course, the Easter Week begins with our celebration today, a welcome bright spot in the sombre season of Lent, (which is our time preparation), with the remembrance of the first, so-called “Palm Sunday”, with it the focus on the identity of the man Jesus.

People like parades and public celebrations. Normally crowds would line Macquarie Street in Hobart in a few weeks’ time for the Anzac Day parade. This year will be eerily quiet.

We can only anticipate the street celebrations when we finally are released from home isolation at the end of this pandemic. I am imagining a great day of joy. And am already looking forward to shaking hands and giving a hug or two. It will be full of poignant meaning, as it will tell of the end of the virus that is threatening our lives.

Our readings this morning remind us of a street celebration on the road to Jerusalem 2000 years ago. And this street celebration is full of poignant meaning as well. Meaning that prepares us for the story to unfold in the week ahead – culminating in the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

The Story

Matthew, like each of the other gospel writers recounts this moment in Jesus’ life. As he tells the story, Jesus has been heading for Jerusalem since chapter 16 and finally here in chapter 21 he is near the city, atop the final ridge on what is known as the Mt of Olives. Jerusalem lies below him across the Kidron Valley. This is a view of the same spot today.

Jesus sent two of his disciples off with a strange request - “Go into the village ahead of you, [he said] and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.”

The friends did as they were told, they got the donkey, brought it back and laid their outer garments on it. Jesus hops on the donkey and heads off down the hill towards the city gates of Jerusalem.

It was the time of the Jewish Passover and this meant lots of people were travelling to Jerusalem and there were crowds on the roads. Then a remarkable thing happened, rather than making his way

unnoticed, the crowd begins to erupt. THEY took off their outer cloaks and laid them on the ground, tore the branches off the trees by the road and laid them down, forming a carpet for Jesus and his donkey.

Then they started to chant, the one's up ahead and the ones behind. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Imagine the people flocking onto the road, joining in with the singing and dancing, cheering and clapping as he made his way down the hill, across the valley and up to the city gate.

When Jesus gets into Jerusalem, with all this excitement, you might expect a civic reception or a celebration. But Jesus does a very odd thing. He goes to the Temple, and finds people there as usual selling things in the forecourt. The story has it that this fills him with anger and he flips the tables and says: "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers."

Then after healing some people, and the whole thing making the temple officials really angry, he heads back out of the city to the nearby town of Bethany.

Who is this?

This is not just quaint story, a sentimental fable, or even a random event. But it has all the hallmarks of a deliberate plan by Jesus to make a point. He didn't need to ride a donkey for the last kilometre or two, when he had walked 80kms to get there. He wasn't even intending to stay in Jerusalem, but went back to Bethany.

A clue to what this story is about, is what happens in the middle. In verse 10 we read that the "whole city" was stirred up and asked the question: "Who is this?"

And it is a very good question, that begs an answer that is found in the story itself. And it is a very good question for us to get straight, in the week leading up to Easter. For what he will do next weekend, is grounded in our answer to this question. Who is this?

And I might say, the answer to the question "Who IS this?" is also a pivotal one as we live through the Coronavirus pandemic, as I hope we'll soon see.

Messiah

The first answer to the question "Who is this?" in the story, is – Jesus is the Messiah.

The messiah was an anticipated figure in the first century. The word means "God's anointed one", his chosen one. And the hope was for a Messiah who was mighty liberator, especially to liberate the people from the rule of their Roman overlords. The popular view was that he would be a mighty warrior riding on a horse.

But the Jewish scriptures painted a very different picture to this. The prophet Zechariah foretold the coming of the Messiah. And he is quoted in v5.

⁵ "Tell the daughter of Zion, (that's Jerusalem)
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Rather than coming on a horse as a mighty warrior, the Messiah would come in humility, in peace and gentleness, riding on a donkey.

Jesus' action of getting and riding a donkey says a lot – he is God's chosen one, the anointed messiah, god's deliverer as was spoken about by the prophet. Those with ears to hear would know.

The King

The second answer to the question: "Who is this?" is, Jesus is the King.

Two things in this story show Jesus as the king.

The first is the WAY he got his donkey. It was the right of ancient kings, to requisition things for their needs. I need a donkey, and so I go and get one. And this is just what Jesus does – "The Lord has need of it." and so he gets it.

But the second clue is his actual ride into town.

Israel was a walking country. Everyone walked and this was the only way to get from a to b. Unless of course you were sick or a VIP. And then you might ride on an animal. The fact that Jesus took a ride on a donkey said volumes about his status. He was coming as a King.

And the crowd knew this, and showed it by shouting out: Hosanna to the Son of David – David being Israel's greatest king. The phrase "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" from our Psalm this morning, was reserved especially for the arrival of the King.

Make no mistake, this very deliberate act of Jesus, and the response of the crowd clearly makes this point. This was a royal procession.

The Lord

And if that were not enough, the third answer to the question "who is this?" is, that Jesus is Lord.

And we find this in his actions in the temple. The temple in Jerusalem was the centre of Jewish religious life. And by Jesus coming in, and taking charge and overturning the tables, he deliberately put himself against the temple authorities, and stakes his claim in the worship life of the people.

In fact, what he is doing is showing himself to be the Lord. Well above the religious practices of the day. He had called people to believe in him.

This whole event was no accident

As Jesus prepared for the week ahead, when he would die for the sins of all, he lets people know exactly who he is: the Messiah, The King and the Lord of all.

Who is Jesus for Today?

It seems to me, as we face the coronavirus and all of its challenges, which are many. And as we prepare for this week leading to the cross this coming Friday. That knowing Jesus is Messiah, King and Lord makes all the difference.

You see as the Messiah / or the Christ as we know him (means the same thing). He is STILL the liberator of human beings. Not throwing off foreign overlords or oppressive regimes or the even the virus. But liberating our deepest selves.

We carry all kinds of oppressions: bad moments of our history, experiences like abuse or mistreatment, scars from our past. We are oppressed by sorrow and illness. We experience the fallenness of the world. Our minds sometimes torment us. We carry fears of what might be, or might not be.

Most of us don't think about death day to day – we pretty much operate as though we were immortal. But right now, death is at our door. Literally we are told to stay home, to save lives, our own and others. Many of us are contemplating death for the first time. "It could be me", we think. This is the pandemic of fear.

The promise of Jesus is liberation from these oppressions. He is the ONLY one to turn to in times like this.

Jesus said to his disciples that he had come to give life in all its fullness. And his liberation of us, comes by our surrender to him. He is the only one who has conquered death, and won our liberation from fear, from our past, from our illnesses and sorrows, and all that holds us from each other and from him.

He has conquered death, the greatest liberation. He rules over the world and life and death as our King. He is the Lord, the one worthy of our worship.

And as I face as uncertain a future as you. As the Coronavirus threatens our country, its economy, and our livelihoods, when everything we used to treat as "certain" has been stripped away, when we are facing the fear of death, perhaps for the first time in our lives – then I want to trust the one who has liberated death, rules over life, and calls me to follow.

As our liberator, as our King and Lord, he wants our submission, our trust, for us to give away our control of our lives and lean upon him. To let go of pride and ambition, and control and fear and bitterness and selfishness, and to focus on him. And to live lives of trust.

The Easter message heralded by this deliberate act of self-disclosure, is designed to draw us more closely to him in Trust and Obedience and Love.

My brothers and sisters, the cross and resurrection we anticipate this week, is the ultimate work of the Messiah, who gives himself for our liberation; the ultimate work of the King who reigns over death and life and gives us hope; and ultimate work of the Lord who calls for our worship.

May God bless you this week, as you prepare to remember again his death for you and his resurrection glory. Amen