

**14 April 2019**

**Luke 19.28-40**

**Philippians 2.5-11**

**The Servant King**

We appear to be living in the age of the so-called 'strong leader' ... and the world is all the more dangerous for it.

- Benjamin Netanyahu has been re-elected in Israel this week ... and as the election campaign wore on his rhetoric became more hard-line in order to secure the votes.
- Last year Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil. Part of his election campaign was to forcibly integrate the indigenous peoples of Brazil. He is quoted as saying that it was a shame "that the Brazilian cavalry wasn't as efficient as the Americans, who exterminated the Indians."
- We have Donald Trump in America, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey.

And all of these, have been elected by the people of their countries.

But isn't it necessary for our leaders to be 'strong'?

After all, here in the UK, we are in apparent political chaos because we have a Prime Minister who campaigned offering us 'strong and stable' government ... but has actually been able to deliver neither strength nor stability.

And so the 'strong leader' appears very attractive.

Except that all of these strong leaders are fiercely nationalistic; are dismissive of opposing voices; engender a culture of fear against 'others' who threaten their national life; and have little time for the global institutions like the United Nations who seek to protect human rights and encourage multi-national cooperation.

And against all of this backdrop, we celebrate Palm Sunday. Once again we find ourselves telling the – some would say - quaint story of a carpenter from Nazareth, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey ...

And it is difficult to see how this donkey-riding peasant craftsman, surrounded by excitable crowds singing their Passover Psalms could ever have very much to say to these world leaders, or to us trying to navigate our life in this confusing, sometimes threatening, 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

Surely, he is just not strong enough to offer us any hope, is he?

Nice words ... nice thoughts ... but he just doesn't cut the mustard when it comes to a global impact.

And then we put alongside this, Paul's words from Philippians chapter 2. Now I say that they are Paul's words. Many now think that Paul was actually quoting from one of the hymns from the early Christian church, because the words have a poetic rhythm to them.

And the words, in just a few brief verses, celebrate the story of the whole of Jesus' life – from incarnation, through to death and then on to exaltation.

And the theme of the whole story is Jesus as servant.

- the incarnation is the story of the one who shared God's glory, wrapped in power, choosing in humility to share our humanity, not to display his power, but to divest his power and become a servant among us
- the death of Jesus, is the culmination of that story of the obedient servant, giving his life for those he is serving.
- and it is the servant who is exalted and who is now declared to be Lord.

The story of Jesus is God not putting his seal on a life of domination, of mastery and of control, but God putting his seal – his stamp of approval – on the life of service, of suffering, of sacrifice ... even on apparent failure.

After all, that is what the cross looked like. The strong of the world had won. They had had their way.

- The religious leaders who believed that Jesus had to be silenced, because he what he was saying was too dangerous.
- The political leaders who thought it expedient to kill him, because his presence threatened their power.

But this hymn speaks of the great reversal. This defeated, disempowered king is afforded power and authority by God, not despite his way of servanthood, but because of his way of servanthood.

And so, because of Jesus, we need to look at strength and power in a new light.

And part of this is to recognise that there are different sorts of strength, and different sorts of power.

This is actually true in the physical world as it is in the world of interpersonal relationships, politics and spirituality.

You only have to think about an egg to see this.

We all think of eggs as being fragile – they break easily.

But actually eggs are wonderfully designed, because they are also incredibly strong. In fact, they are so strong that a tray of a dozen eggs is able to support the weight of an adult ... as long as they tread carefully.

To do its job, the egg is designed to be strong enough to offer protection to the chick growing inside, and to enable the hen to sit on the egg without breaking it. But it also needs to be delicate enough to enable the newly emerging chick to peck its way out.

It's strength is designed to protect life ... but if it were too strong it would stifle life and prevent new life from flourishing ...

It's weakness is part of its purpose, if you like.

For the protection and giving of life you need both strength and vulnerability.

The question is not actually how strong something is, but whether something has the right kind of strength for the right situation. But also whether the use of strength and power protects and enables the flourishing of life, or restricts and denies the flourishing of life.

Let's have a look at the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to get some clues about the kind of strength that Jesus displays.

Firstly, the symbolism of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is clearly that he comes as Prince of Peace. He accepts the praises of the people who welcome him as king, but by riding on a donkey he is saying that he is the king who is all about peace.

He comes

- not as victor,
- nor as insurgent,
- nor as political agitator,
- nor as guerrilla leader,
- nor as freedom fighter

... but he comes on his own terms. And his own terms are always the terms of peace.

He is the donkey-riding king, who challenges all of our notions of what a king should be and so all of our notions of what power and strength look like.

When eventually he comes face to face with those in power,

- he does not threaten them, nor belittle them
- He does not play power games with them
- he does not retaliate on their terms.

Instead he remains resolutely the man who stands for peace ... to the point of praying on the cross,

“Father, forgive them, for they know now what they do.”

For many this is sheer folly ... weakness ... giving in to the powers – a servant who simply rolls over and takes the punishment, because that is what servants do.

But for others, this is true strength. This is the power of love at work ...

But how can this be strength? Perhaps we need to look at two other aspects of this story. If in this story we see Jesus the man of peace, then we also see other aspects of Jesus' character in this story.

Secondly, Jesus is purposeful in his actions.

Jesus had clearly gone to great lengths to put in place all of the arrangements for his entry into Jerusalem. It didn't happen by accident.

He had made arrangements with the owner of the donkey. He told his disciples exactly what to say.

Jesus was in control of what was happening.

And here we hit something of a conundrum, something of a puzzle, when we talk about Jesus being a servant. Because the definition of a servant or a slave is that they do what they are told. They are not masters of their destiny. When told to jump, they ask 'How high?'

But here is Jesus being resolute and purposeful as he makes for Jerusalem.

Jesus may be servant, but he is servant of his own choosing –

Throughout the hymn that Paul quotes Jesus, although the servant, is the one in full control of his actions and his destiny.

“he made himself nothing, taking the very form of a servant...” (this is his choice ...)

“he humbled himself, and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.” (he is in control, not ultimately being controlled)

The story of the passion of Jesus can be told in two ways. It can be told from the perspective of what others do to Jesus – he is handed over ...he is betrayed ... he is tried and tortured ... he is put to death on the cross.

But it can also be told from the perspective of Jesus.

- Jesus – the one who came to seek and to save the lost and to give his life as a ransom for many.
- Jesus – the one who in the Passover meal on the night of his arrest says, “This is my body, given for you.”

He comes as servant. But he comes as servant with strength of purpose, and whatever is done to him during this week he embraces it as part of the offering of himself in love.

Thirdly, if this act is purposeful, it is also provocative ... and intentionally provocative.

Jesus knew that he would not be seen as just another pilgrim riding a donkey into Jerusalem for the Passover festival. He knew that the crowds around him would see his approach to Jerusalem as a significant moment. They believed he was the bringer of God's kingdom. So where else would he come to claim his throne other than in Jerusalem?

When challenged by the Pharisees to stop his disciples singing his praises, Jesus said

“If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out!”

But perhaps something of the provocative nature of this event can be found in the small detail that the donkey that Jesus rides is one that has never been ridden before.

Now you would have thought that this would have been something of a risk.

But it is possible that it is highly symbolic.

Way back in Israel’s history, before even David had been crowned king, the Ark of the Covenant had been captured by the Philistines. The Ark of the Covenant contained symbols of the people of Israel’s journey through the wilderness and was revered as the sacred symbol of God’s presence with his people.

The Philistines agreed to return the Ark to the Israelites and were given precise instructions as to how they should do this in order to respect its sacred nature. One of the criteria was that it was to be transported on a cart, pulled by oxen that had never worn a yoke before. (1 Sam 6.7)

By choosing to ride on a donkey that had never been ridden before, it is quite possible that Jesus is suggesting that his coming to Jerusalem on this occasion, bears the same kind of significance as the returning of the Ark of the Covenant had done many hundreds of years before.

Such a claim would have been seen as provocative.

And Jesus’ presence is always provocative ... because he challenges and upsets

- he makes people think again
- he asks people to make life-changing decisions

And even as he comes to us as servant, his very servanthood is provocative.

When he washes the disciples’ feet, he is being intentionally provocative. He knew that he would be shaming them. He knew that they would be made to feel uncomfortable.

And ultimately his giving of himself to die on the cross is a potent act in which he embraces the shame of crucifixion in order to make a powerful statement of God’s forgiving, peace-making, reconciling love.

This is God's provocative challenge of all of our pre-conceived ideas of strength and power, of domination and control.

But in his purposefulness and provocative ways, he also challenges docility, passivity, cynicism and resignation.

He comes as servant not to be docile, not to encourage passivity, not to support resignation, but to challenge all of that in us, by inviting us into his ways of peace and servanthood, that are full of purpose and will call us to provocative and prophetic action in the world in the name of love.