

Sunday 24 March 2024, Palm Sunday Choral Matins

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

Hosanna! Blessed be the King that cometh in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna in the Highest Heavens!

How do you think the jubilant crowd felt when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey? Were they surprised, perhaps drawn by a commotion into a mass gathering no one had planned and for which no one had looked? Was this the revelation of a new King of the Jews, a man after God's own heart like great King David? What possibilities lay in the back of people's minds? What excitement? What thoughts of the future? The Roman overlords vanquished, the Temple freed to appoint its own High Priests, the gilded glory of Solomon shining out, Jerusalem a City on a Hill?!

We know from our vantage point of millennia that any such hopes were to be disappointed. Within a few brief days the King of the Jews was hanging on the cross. David's heir was placed in a tomb. Within the lifetime of some of those palm-bearing children, the Temple itself was thrown down, a ruin to be trampled underfoot by Roman legions: Solomon's glory a fading memory. How do you think the anguished crowd felt when the walls of Jerusalem were torn down, its gardens uprooted? As Josephus writes,

Nor could any foreigner that had formerly seen Judaea and the most beautiful suburbs of the city, and now saw it as a desert, but lament and mourn sadly at so great a change. For the war had laid all signs of beauty quite waste. Nor had anyone who had known the place before, had come on a sudden to it now, would he have known it again.

How do you think they felt who trusted in the building and maintenance of an earthly kingdom, a religious ethno-state, a land of ancestral milk and honey? Was all hope for the future lost? Was God no longer in his heaven? Priest and people all scattered across the hills, shepherdless sheep. A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and lamentation for the children of Israel who are no more.

Let me be frank with you, my friends. This is how it always ends for those who put their trust in an earthly kingdom. If not in your lifetime, then in the lifetime of your children or your children's children, the order we believe is fixed and constant will fall. No matter our alliances, no matter our defences, no matter our powers, it will all one day come to an end. And you have a choice to make. Do you find yourself comfortless, stateless, life meaningless or are you set upon the rock that is higher than any other, and therefore safe from the breaking storm? I put it in these blunt terms because it is impossible for us as Christians to acknowledge two authorities in our lives. Either we trust in the powers of this world which is fading away or we trust in the power of the one who made the world by a breath and who lives forever.

Jesus, it is said, came to inaugurate a kingdom. Many of those who shouted 'Hosanna!' later cried out 'Crucify!' How fickle the joyful throng. For his kingdom, it became clear to them quite quickly, was not a reestablishment of David's strong city or of Solomon's ivory palaces. It was a kingdom built on suffering and rooted in sacrifice. King Jesus did not lord himself over subjects, but wrapped a towel around his waist and esteemed his friends better

than himself. He did not cast out the powers of Rome, though he did cast out the powers of Satan. This spiritual kingdom with its servant king was not what they wanted.

And what do you want, friends? Do you want to see the extension of the Pax Americana, the peace that comes from free movement of labour and capital? Do you place your hope in the rearmament of Europe? Perhaps you are disinclined to militarism and believe that universal human rights will win the day through an appeal to each person's desire for freedom from constraint. Maybe you hope simply for peace in your days, knowing that the time is short.

This world is not enough. It is not enough to satisfy the longing of our hearts for peace. Nor can it provide strength and unity enough to put off the aggressor and the bloodthirsty. There have been many kingdoms and many ages of peace. There are golden ages in the history of every land; there may be again. And like falling autumn leaves they will crumble to dust beneath the relentless march of time. Rising and falling, peace and war, lives lived fully and lives lost tragically. We know the pattern, though we do our best to pretend it will be different this time.

Where does that impulse come from? Let me suggest to you that it comes from our hearts that are formed after the image of God. We seek a kingdom because we are made for a kingdom; but we so easily mistake a temporary reprieve for an everlasting hope. We are distractible, fallible, manipulable. So we praise the strongman, lift up the lawmaker, and invest in security. It's dust, dear ones. Just dust. Store not up for yourselves treasures on earth where rust and moth destroy and where thieves break through and steal.

Hosanna! Blessed is the King that cometh! The king on the cross said to his bleeding companion, 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' The king lay in the tomb breaking the Gates of Death. The king stood in the morning light of the garden opening our path to eternal Eden. And the king who ascended calls us to look up for the Kingdom of Heaven. The kingdom Jesus came to build will last forever because it is not of this world. Its armies do not march across mountains. Its capital city is not in a verdant valley watered by a mighty river. Its nobles are not hereditary lords dressed in ermine and sarsenet. Rather, its armies are the angelic host who sang for joy at the creation of the morning stars. Its capital city is the pearly-gated Jerusalem set four-square in the heavens. Its nobles are the martyrs clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands. They cry Hosanna! to the Lamb that was slain, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, eternal ruler of a kingdom that cannot be shaken. This kingdom lives in God's heaven and God's time and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in our very hearts if we will be its citizens by faith. True hope lies there- and here within- not here on earth.

Do not waste your life trusting in dust. Trust the one whose word breathed into the dust and made it live and stand. The good earth will fade and, on the last day, the clouds will be rolled back as a scroll. The kingdoms built by men- the good and the bad- will all fall away when the Kingdom of Jesus comes at last. A lasting kingdom and a lasting peace where weary hearts will rest in the bosom of the Saviour; that is our sure and certain hope. So rest even now in the heart of Jesus. Trust today in Jesus the King, for his kingdom, his glorious, loving kingdom, will have no end. Amen.