



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

St. Matthew 21:1-13

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The Gospel we read on Christmas Day is the introduction to St. John's Gospel. Those familiar words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world."

The light, God's Messiah, Jesus has come into the world. He's brought light into the darkness. He's brought life into the middle of death. In him, God has become present to the world. But between us and Christmas, between us and the coming of the light, stands Advent—to remind us what the world was like *before* light and life came into the midst of darkness and death—so that we might appreciate more the gift that God has given us in Jesus, so that we might appreciate more his love, his mercy, and his grace; so that we might appreciate more his faithfulness as we see his promises fulfilled in the Christmas story. So that we might better live out the story he's given *us* in preparation for the day when he comes again.

And so Advent begins with Jesus, the Messiah, the anointed king, on the Sunday before his crucifixion. Palm Sunday. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Today we have St. Matthew's telling of that day. He writes—at the

beginning of Chapter 21: "When they came near to Jerusalem and arrived at Bethpage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of the disciples on ahead."

The road from Jericho up to Jerusalem made its final approach to the city around the southern slope of the Mount of Olives. As the road came over the ridge, there was Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, a mass of great walls and rooftops, and above it all on Mount Zion, was the temple—the place where earth and heaven were supposed to overlap, the place where men and women could draw near to the presence of God, the *shekinah*, the cloud of glory that sat on the ark in the holy of holies. A cloud of smoke went up perpetually from the altar in the temple court where the burnt offerings were made. This was the scene that met Jesus as the road took him over the Mount of Olives: the city, bustling with crowds of visitors for the Passover, the temple in all its beautiful glory standing above the city, and that column of smoke going up, an aroma to the Lord.

A Jewish man or woman, walking over that ridge and seeing this scene ahead, might be overcome. It was heaven on earth—or the closest you could get to it. It was a scene of glory. It was a scene that would make your heart swell with pride, knowing that you were the people who lived with the living God in your midst. And it was exciting for all these people travelling from the outlying regions of Judea and Galilee—like they were arriving at the centre of the universe. I think of the description Victorian travellers gave of arriving in London, to the heart of the British Empire. To the way I've heard New Yorkers talk of flying home from other parts of the world and seeing the skyscrapers or the Statue of Liberty out the window and knowing that you're home and swelling with pride because their home is—today—the centre of the universe. This past March, Veronica I drove down Highway 101 to the central California Coast. Between

Sausalito and the Marin Headlands, you pass through the Waldo Tunnel and when you come out the south end of the tunnel, you're greeted with a stunning panoramic vista of the Golden Gate Bridge with San Francisco's skyscrapers in the background. That's where I was born. And when we drove out of the tunnel and saw that view, I think I felt something very much like the Jews would have felt coming round the Mount of Olives and seeing Jerusalem and the temple in the distance. Jesus' disciples—a bunch of bumpkins from Galilee, way up in the north—must have felt that way. But not Jesus. Matthew leaves this part out, but St. Luke tells us that Jesus, seeing that beautiful and glorious view, stopped and began to sob. The beauty, the glory wasn't lost on him, but he sobbed because he knew that it masked a people with no heart for God. The city and temple were like a whitewashed tomb—beautiful, but full of dead men's bones. He knew—as everyone knew, but dared not admit—the glory, the presence of God was not there. The smoke may have risen from the altar, but the holy holies was bare and empty—just like the heart of the people. Jesus saw the coming judgement of God on a faithless people. He saw the city and the temple as they would be in a generation: a smoking ruin.

Matthew puts our attention on Jesus' acted out prophecy. He sends two of his disciples ahead into the village of Bethpage, "'Go into the village,' he said, 'and at once you'll find a donkey tied up and a foal beside it. Untie them and bring them to me. And if anyone says anything to you, say, 'The lord needs them, and he'll send them back straightaway.'" He sent them off at once... So the disciples went off and did as Jesus had told them. They brought the donkey and its foal and put their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them." Why? Well, says Matthew, "This happened so that the prophet's words might be fulfilled: 'Tell this to Zion's daughter: Behold! Here comes your king; humble and

riding on a donkey, yes, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Matthew quotes from the Prophet Zechariah. Matthew could see what Jesus was doing here. Jesus never did anything randomly or without reason. The location, the donkey, the colt—they’re all important. Jesus could have taken a different route to Jerusalem, but he picked this one so that he’d be standing on the Mount of Olives when all this happened. This was the spot where Zechariah said that the Lord would stand when he came in judgement on faithless Jerusalem. And Zechariah explains the strange command to the disciples about the donkey. This was not how kings made their triumphal processions. At least, not ordinary kings. They were carried by their servants or they rode on horseback or in a chariot. But Zechariah, hundreds of years before, had highlighted the humble nature of the coming Messiah. He was the one who would ride to his coronation on the back of a humble donkey.

Jesus’ acted out prophecy reveals who he is and it exposes all the wrong ideas his people had about the Lord and his Messiah—and it probably exposes some of our wrong ideas, too. To the people who longed for the Lord to come in judgement on the nations, Jesus comes in judgement to his own people. To the people who imagined the Messiah coming in a chariot with a great army to liberate Jerusalem and to reign over his people like a greater David, Jesus comes riding on a donkey with an army of ordinary pilgrims. To the people who imagined God coming in merciless, vengeful, pitiless wrath to bring judgement on sin, Jesus comes in humility, weeping over the coming judgement. Jesus is coming to take his throne, to fulfil what the Prophets—like Zechariah—had spoken, to show the Lord’s faithfulness, but not in the way anyone expected.

I think of our Epistle today from Romans, where St. Paul writes those

words: “Owe no one anything, but to love one another, for the one who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the *torah*.” I don’t think Paul could have written those words before he met the risen Jesus. He certainly knew what the greatest commandments were: to love God and to love his neighbour. But he didn’t understand. He was part of that Jerusalem Jesus wept over. A city that talked about love of God and love of neighbour, but a city—a nation—of people at each other’s throats, a people longing eagerly for fire and brimstone to rain down on their enemies, a people with little if any thought for those in their midst most in need, a people ready to cry out in demonic rage for the crucifixion of their own Messiah. And a people who did all these things with an absolute and devoted passion for a God they utterly misunderstood. And this was why what should have been the beating heart of Jerusalem—the presence of the living God in the temple—this is why it, why *he* was missing. The people had returned from their Babylonian exile, they had rebuilt the temple, but the heart of the people was still far from God. They were impure. Their salt had lost its savour. Their light had turned to darkness. They were false witnesses of their God. And so his presence, the cloud of glory, had never returned.

The road to Jerusalem was jammed with people who say Jesus sobbing. They probably thought his tears were tears of joy to see the holy city. Little did they know. They were just excited to see him. They’d heard the stories. Word was no doubt spread through about the healing of blind Bartimaeus in Jericho. Pilgrims from Galilee told others of the amazing things Jesus had done and taught there. And as the disciples places their coats on the donkey and Jesus took his place, word was going through the crowd: “That’s him!”

So, says Matthew, “the great crowd spread *their* coats on the road. Others cut branches from the trees and

scattered them on the road. The crowds went on ahead of him and those who were following behind shouted: ‘Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!’”

The crowd surrounds Jesus. All the way to Jerusalem they’d been singing the psalms of ascent and the royal psalms. Songs full of hope. Psalms about that recalled the glory days of David, psalms about God coming to his people, psalms about God finally setting this broken world to rights. Psalms that looked forward to the coming Messiah. And now—maybe, they hoped—here he was. Not like anyone expected, but they’d heard the stories. Maybe they’d heard him preaching. Maybe they’d seen his miracles. And that was enough. So they parade him down the Mount of Olives, across the valley, and back up and into the gates of Jerusalem.

Along the way they, Matthew says, they laid their coats and palm branches on the ground. Now it’s the people acting out prophetically even if they didn’t know it.

Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience makes sure that as they read this, they’re reminded of a scene or two from their own history. In 2 Kings 9 we read about Jehoram. He was King of Israel, the son of the wicked King Ahab. And in Jehoram, the apple had not fallen far from the tree. He was as wicked as his father, so the prophet Elisha ordered that Jehu, instead, was to be anointed King in his place. He announced that Jehu would bring the Lord’s judgement on the wicked house of Ahab. As Jehu was anointed by the prophet, the men who were gathered cast their coats on the ground before him and blew a trumpet.

And then there’s Judas Maccabeus. 2 Maccabees 10:7 describes the people hailing Judas as king by laying wreaths and palm branches at his feet. Judas had not only defeated

Israel's enemies and liberated the nation, but he had purified the temple from its defilement by the Greeks. He was a national hero—particularly for the Pharisees and the Zealots. Judas' kingdom inspired hope.

But Jehu was not the saviour the people hoped for. As a king he was a mixed bag. He put an end to the more outrageous form of idolatry in Judah. He got rid of the altars to Baal. But he never removed the golden calves that Jeroboam has set up at Bethel and Dan. He failed to dig out the root of Judah's idolatry and faithlessness to the Lord. In the end, the Lord still allowed the people to be exiled for their faithlessness. And Judas Maccabeus. He was a national hero. But his kingdom was short-lived. The *shekinah* never returned to the temple, despite his zealotry for *torah*. The hope he'd brought to the people was quickly crushed. But this time, looking at Jesus, the people hoped, it would be different. And so they sing to him. They acclaim him as the Messiah, the anointed king. "Hosanna—*save us*—O son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. O Hosanna—*save us*—we cry to heaven!"

Matthew gives us a sense of the longing and hope of the people. They're desperate for the Lord to come and set their broken world to rights. Jesus sees it too and I expect it made him weep all the more, because he knew that God's new world was not going to come the way they wanted it to, he knew that he would not go to his messianic throne the way they wanted him to, because he knew that to set everything to rights would mean judging the sin and corruption of his people and the city and even the temple. And he knew the only way to his throne was through their rejection and death on Roman cross.

But on he went into the city. Acting out the prophecy. Matthew writes that "When they came into Jerusalem, the

whole city was gripped with excitement. 'Who is this?' they were saying. 'This is the prophet, Jesus,' replied the crowds, 'from Nazareth in Galilee!' This is the Prophet. They weren't saying that Jesus was just another prophet. He was *the* Prophet. The one the people hailed Jesus as in our Gospel last Sunday, after he fed the multitude. He was the one promised to come, like another Moses, to save the people and lead them out of bondage. In other words, "This is the Messiah, Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee."

He had come to take his throne. And so from the gate of the city, Jesus led the triumphal parade of cheering people through the winding streets—the same route he would take in reverse, bearing a cross, just five days later. He made his way up and up through the city to the temple and through the gate. And when he got there, Matthew says, "Jesus threw out all the people who were buying and selling in the temple. He flipped over the tables of the money-changers and the seats of the dove-sellers. 'It is written,' he said to them, 'My house will be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a lair of bandits!'"

Jehu and Judas Maccabeus had cleansed the temple. That was the expectation of the Messiah. But not like this. I think we often focus too much on Jesus' actions as a condemnation of the commerce going on in the temple—probably because we're aware of the evils of our own overly materialistic and commercialistic culture. I don't think Jesus was angered by the commerce itself. People needed animals for the sacrifices and not everyone was a farmer. A lot of people were travelling from far away and it wasn't easy or realistic to bring the animals with them. And the money changers, well, since the temple only used its own coinage, they were at least a necessary evil. Nevertheless when you think of Mary and Joseph going to the temple for her purification after the

birth of Jesus and offering two turtledoves, it says something about how poor they were. When you think about the words of her *Magnificat*, singing about filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty, when you think of the widow offering her "mite" in the offering box, you certainly get the sense that the system was privileging the rich and making access to the temple a burden for the poor—and in that this whole system was emblematic of the way in which Israel had lost the heart of God and was desperately in need of judgment...or renewal...or as it would happen: *both*.

But the really important thing about Jesus flipping tables and driving out the merchants is something I think we're prone to missing. Again, this is another acted out prophecy. The really important thing is that what Jesus did brought the work of the priests and the whole sacrificial system that day to a grinding halt. It goes along with everything else he said about the temple—like announcing that he would tear it down and rebuild it in three days—and it goes right along with all the times that he bypassed the temple, the priests, and the sacrificial system by offering forgiveness apart from them. That, far more than everything else, is what had angered the Pharisees. That was what got him arrested and crucified.

So what Jesus is getting at here is that the Messiah has come, not just to purify the temple, but to establish a new and better one. To really inaugurate the work of new creation that the old temple had always pointed to. The people had forgotten this. The temple was never meant to be an end in itself. The temple pointed to God's future—to the day when sin is gone, to the day when creation is made new and the garden restored, and to the day when men and women are made new as well, to the day when a renewed humanity once again lives in God's presence and serves in his temple as priests.

And, Brothers and Sisters, that's what Jesus inaugurated through his crucifixion and resurrection. He shed his blood, not for a building, not for an altar made of stone, but for a people: a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for their sins. At the cross, Jesus washed his people clean and he's washed them—he's washed *us* clean—so that *we* can be God's temple. And so Jesus rose from the grave and ascended to the right hand of his Father, the perfect man, the new Adam, to take up his vocation as high priest. And as high priest, he's poured God's Spirit into his people, purified by his blood. He's made us his temple and called us to join in the vocation we were originally created for: to be God's priests and stewards serving beside our saviour.

So Advent comes as a forced pause. We're racing towards Christmas and to the joy it represents. And the church says, "Hold on. Slow down. You need to stop and think about what it all means. You need to stop and think about why Jesus came, why he was born, why it was necessary for light and life to be born into the world. You need to reflect on the darkness of this fallen and broken world. You need to reflect on the awfulness of sin and of death and of our slavery to them so that you can fully appreciate the gift in the manger with more than mushy holiday sentimentalism. This is the Messiah, this is the saviour—Israel's saviour and now our saviour. Come not just to make us feel good, but come to deliver us from sin and death, come to set God's creation to rights. Come to purify us with his blood, to dwell in the midst of the people, to fill us with God's Spirit, and to sweep us up into his messianic mission. Brothers and Sisters, to make us the people in whom the world encounters the glory of the living God and meets the humble saviour whose kingdom has come, not by a sword, but by the cross. To make us stewards of the Gospel that, empowered by the

Spirit, we might prepare the world for Jesus' return.

Let's pray: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*