

*Jesus the provocateur*

Today, the Sunday before Easter, being Palm Sunday, we have enacted Jesus' entry into Jerusalem during the festival of the Passover. Here he comes, surrounded by his followers who acclaim him as David's son, the long awaited king, as they strew the road with their cloaks and – at least in John's Gospel but actually only in John's Gospel - they wave palm branches. In recent times however, for reasons that need not detain us, today has been called Palm and Passion Sunday and it is the Sunday on which the church pauses, not only to recall Jesus' entry into the city, but also the death that awaited him there and the meaning of that death and what it accomplished. For this reason in some churches today people will be focusing on the crucifixion and trying to understand how it is much more than just a cruel and barbaric death – it is also the means by which God reconciles the world to himself and brings salvation. Now, there might not appear to be much of a connection between these two events – the entry into the city and the cross and what happened there five days later - but I want to try this morning to make such a connection and in so doing to try to grasp something of what was happening in Jesus' death. Clearly the mystery of what took place there on that hill outside Jerusalem as darkness came over the land and the earth trembled is far beyond us. We can never comprehend it, but at least we can catch glimpses that might help us to understand.

And I want to start this morning by considering Jesus' actions on the first Palm Sunday as deeply provocative – calculated to stir up a strong response. You see, at one level, this parade into Jerusalem was probably something of a parody, a satire. Scholars tell us that in Jerusalem in those days leading up to the Passover – maybe even at that very moment - there was another procession entering Jerusalem at a different gate. This was an imperial procession carrying Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, into the capital. If you'd been there you would have heard the sound of marching feet and the hoofs of warhorses. You'd have heard the clinking of bridles and the beating of drums and you would have seen spears and swords and armour and the glint of sun on helmets and on golden eagles mounted on poles. This was a procession carefully

choreographed to cow the populace into submission, to remind them of Rome's imperial power - just in case some hotheads might decide that this Passover season was a good time for an uprising.

Well, Jesus' entry into the city is almost a mocking of that. There he is with his rag-bag band of followers who have come down from the North, from the provinces like Galilee which were looked down upon by the wealthy Jerusalem elite, and rather than riding a warhorse he is riding a donkey. And not only that but behind the donkey there follows her colt. In other words this is a maternal, nursing donkey and its baby – you could hardly be further removed from Pilate's military mount. This is a caricature, almost a mocking of Rome's pretensions and Rome would not take kindly to such ridicule. And besides, despite the theatrical nature of this procession it was nevertheless politically subversive. Jesus' followers were, after all, shouting 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' and were therefore declaring Jesus to be their rightful king. This is pushing all the buttons, asking for a reaction. Indeed, no wonder we are told in verse 10 that 'the whole city was in turmoil' – literally the whole city was shaken, such was the impact of Jesus' procession.

The provocation, however, does not stop there. Next we are told that Jesus makes straight for the temple and performs this deeply controversial action, overturning the tables of those who changed foreign currency and sold animals for sacrifice. The temple was the great symbol of the nation. It was Jerusalem's pride, especially under the renovations and building programme of King Herod the Great. It was holy ground. How dare Jesus perform this act of vandalism? For Jesus, of course, the temple had become in effect an idol, a false security for Israel and he foresaw its destruction and his action is indeed a preview of that destruction, reducing the temple courts to chaos. But nothing could be more guaranteed to provoke the Jewish establishment into retaliation against Jesus. And indeed there is more. We're told that the after overturning the tables of the money changers the blind and the lame came to Jesus there and he cured them. Well, there was a long legal tradition that forbade the blind and the lame entry to the temple. They were too impure for such a holy place. And now Jesus opens up the temple to these excluded and marginalised people. What an affront to the religious establishment! What an outrage! But there is more. We read next that the

children were there as well, crying ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’, perhaps mimicking what they’d heard from Jesus’ procession into the city, parroting this subversive slogan. Can you imagine how that would have been viewed? How irreverent! Can’t these kids behave? Can’t their parents keep them under control?

So it is one provocation after another. Jesus here is touching all kinds of nerves, tramping on all kinds of sensitivities, inevitably prompting a reaction. Which of course is what he gets. And it could have gone either way but inevitably, as Jesus foresaw, it’s the negative, hostile response that prevails. And what does that achieve? Why should Jesus so deliberately invite this? What did that do apart from deal his fate?

Well, let me put it this way. When we come to the cross, the death of Jesus, Christians believe that Jesus was in some way dealing with the sins of humankind, dealing with sickness that has been visited upon the human race, reconciling God and the world. Christians believe that on the cross Jesus was landing a decisive blow against the evil that infects our world and our lives. But if he was to do that then he had to meet the darkness at its deepest point. He had to confront the horror it at its fullest and most lethal manifestation. He needed to meet it full on, and to do that he had to provoke it to its vicious extreme. He had to stir it up to a fever pitch, to a climax of intensity – and only then absorb it, and exhaust it, and forgive it.

It’s frightening, is it not, the darkness that lurks in human nature – not always visible by any means, not always expressed. Last week, as we know, poison gas was dropped on a Syrian town of Khan Sheikhun, killing around 70 people including children. Horrifying pictures have emerged, portraying the brutality and the suffering. And you wonder how people can do such things. Except that it’s not so exceptional and there have been other atrocities in the Syrian war – many of them. Somehow such evil is provoked, and then it is unleashed. And there are examples closer to home, of course. Last week a young Kurdish asylum seeker, Reker Ahmed, was brutally beaten to within an inch of his life, left for dead by a group of about 30 young people in London’s Borough of Croydon. Again, something provokes such hatred and suddenly it erupts and normally ‘ordinary’ people become capable of extraordinary violence. And that of course follows on the heels of the Westminster

bombings and the injury and loss of life. And that is just the United Kingdom, but there were also the events in Stockholm and beyond these there are those single words that have come to carry such baggage, such evil freight: the Holocaust, Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Syria... the list is endless.

And an act such as that in Syria last week creates a huge dilemma, a quandary: respond with force as the Americans have done and you risk exacerbating the situation and inciting more violence. But ignore it and you risk giving such atrocities free reign and inviting further similar acts to be carried out with impunity. In other words the violence seems to win either way and it seems to gather momentum and you wonder what can stop it in its tracks, what can finally exhaust it. And that, surely, is the story of the first Holy Week. Jesus enters the city where the evil is lurking, hidden, lying low, often in seemingly decent and reasonable people, but waiting to be provoked, waiting to explode, waiting to be aroused in the turmoil that shook Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. And Jesus enters with his comical, carnival parade and then he proceeds to invade and occupy the temple, and that combination triggers the evil and the violence and it spreads and gathers its own momentum. And it reaches a crescendo as later in the week the crowd vent their venom upon him, crying out ‘crucify him! Crucify him!’ And the sheer momentum carries the mob to that lynching on the hill outside the city where the sun is eclipsed and the sky turns black and Jesus cries out in his forsakenness. And then, and only then, is the evil spent. Only then is the violence absorbed, exhausted, burning itself out in that tortured figure. And when in another Gospel, Luke’s account, Jesus cries out ‘Father, forgive them, they know not what they do’ we know that God has taken the very worst that could be thrown at him - and forgiven it. And nothing can therefore ever finally come between us and God.

Jesus, then, is the Provocateur and Palm Sunday is the start of a week of provocation. Entrance on the donkey with her foal, mimicking the pretensions of the imperial army, through the action in the courts of the temple and the welcoming of the blind, the lame and the noisy children, Jesus was forcing the evil that lurked in people and in the political system to show its hand. And there were other provocation as well. There was also Jesus’ controversial teaching and the confrontations

that week with the Pharisees and the other religious figures who were incensed by the things he said and what seemed at times like blasphemy. In these ways Jesus was poking a stick into a hornet's nest. In so doing he was stung – but in so doing he drew evil's sting and left it ultimately defeated. The worst has been unleashed – and it has not prevailed.

And so, as it is put elsewhere, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their very worst trespasses against them. And we recoil in horror from the carnage of Syria. We are sickened at the lows to which humankind can stoop but we know that this will never be the last word. We know that however far we may fall, whatever extremes of depths we may plumb, the love of God in Jesus Christ reaches deeper – he who, in the words of our reading from the letter to the Philippians, humbled himself, and became obedient to the very lowest point of death – even death on a cross. And to him be the glory forever. Amen.