

## SERMON, PALM SUNDAY 29.3.15; Reverend Sarah Clare

### John 12:12-16

There's always a sense of celebration to Palm Sunday, as we gather in the lounge, collect our palms and wave them heartily as we enter the church singing Alleluias. And of course the church looks FABULOUS once again. A real party atmosphere. In sharp contrast to the sober approach of the past few weeks.

Today we begin the service effectively as THE CROWD. The ones singing Hosanna [which means 'save us'].

And I'm reminded of the crowds who have gathered these past weeks for the World Cup cricket, rallying behind the Black Caps. Or perhaps those who gathered last year for the Admiral's Cup... You know how it is - the crowd one moment euphoric, with a win on the board, the next baying for blood, when the result is not as hoped for.... How will the crowds respond later today when the final ball has been bowled? Euphoria if the Black Caps win? Assuredly. But what if they lose...?

'The crowd' - undisciplined, fickle, randomly brought together....

Oh. But that's not us, surely? Shouldn't we actually be **the TEAM** they have come to watch and support, who are all working together towards the same goal, with the same purpose?

That's what we're going to look at today.

The very first Palm Sunday is another of those rare stories that makes it into all 4 gospels. John's version is the shortest. And I want just for a moment to put it into context.

The story of Jesus is coming to a climax. We've reached the end of all the 'signs', as John calls the miracles. And the last is possibly the greatest sign of all, and has just taken place very recently. The raising of Lazarus from the dead. A pretty significant sign by anyone's standards! The Pharisees are so concerned about the response of the people to Lazarus' return to life, they plan to kill him! And Jesus too, of course – the cause of all this trouble, as they see it. He's threatening the stability of Jerusalem.

The festival of the Passover, which was shortly to be celebrated, was a major festival. [That's the festival that commemorates the Exodus, when God through Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.] People came from miles around to gather in Jerusalem. The normal population was reckoned to be around 50,000. But at Passover time that swelled to between 100-120,000!

Picture it – not enough room for everyone in the city so the hillsides would have been dotted with tents and people camping. Huge numbers jostling for space. Inevitably there would have been some tension – this was a country under occupation after all, even if the Romans did allow them to hold their religious festivals.

Into this comes Jesus, the Jesus who has just raised Lazarus, along with his motley band of followers – his **TEAM** - those who so far have stuck with him through thick and thin, following his lead. Jesus as '*coach*', as it were.

And all the things he's been doing for the past 3 years - all the miracles, the healings, the teaching and the ministry – have led

people to believe that this finally is their long awaited 'king' who's going to free them from occupation.

The palms they waved were a symbol of Jewish nationalism, adopted since the time of Judas Maccabeus, 150 yrs or so before, and brought out annually for the festival of Hannukah.

So we have here a veritable melting pot of anticipation. Elements of both Passover and Hannukah together. Crowds and crowds of people, many of them hailing Jesus as the one sent to save them. Shouting, as heard earlier – 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!'

And how does their adopted king enter the city? On a donkey! Yup. Have you seen a grown man on the back of a young donkey? It's laughable. Their legs dangle almost to the ground. Anything less *kingly* is hard to imagine.

But then, Jesus has done this on purpose, hasn't he? Because his understanding of kingship is very different from theirs. They were after an *earthly* king, who would send the Romans packing and bring Jewish rule back to their nation.

Jesus, on the other hand was seeking a unique vision – a kingdom with no physical boundaries; no fences; no gates. Limited only by human imagination, or lack of.

It's a kingdom where all are welcome. And to belong to this kingdom, to join this '*team*', all you need to do is accept Jesus as LORD (as '*coach*', as the disciples did) and put into action those 2 commandments – put God first in your life, and then love and serve one another.....

So, given these two clashing visions, on this day of seeming celebration we can already see the seeds of discontent being sown. The people were cheering a fantasy – a king of their own imagining. They had wanted to make Jesus in their own image - rather than allowing him to remake them in HIS image....

Jesus didn't come to be the boss, to throw his weight around. He came to serve - to seek the lost, meet our needs, minister to us and heal us. That was what he was trying to teach, to 'coach' his people during those 3 brief years. He was modelling a pattern of service and teamwork. He created the church to be a **team** effort! Just like the Black Caps (only with women and children too – and rather less cricket). And what a team they've proved to be!!

And we, as Church today, are meant to be **TEAM JESUS**.... in a place where everyone serves everyone else.... a place where we all work at building each other up – **so we can go out and build up those around us**. *That's* the key. *That's* our purpose, our goal, our team ethic. It's not about me; and it's not about you. It's about **Jesus, his Kingdom** - **and ALL those he came to save**.

I like the way Pastor Jeff Strite puts it. Church should be a place of '**one anothering**'! A place where we should be 'devoted to, accepting of, serving, bearing with, encouraging and forgiving *one another*.' Here inside these walls.... *and* out there, with all those 'others' we're called to '**one another**'.

But all this Kingdom business came at a huge cost. It cost Jesus his life, excruciatingly, as we will be reminded again this week. As we know, the first party doesn't last. The excitement of the crowd turns to frustration. The Hosannas become shouts of CRUCIFY HIM!

And we can sit here, calmly, together, as church, and nod our heads and look back on that ill-disciplined fickle crowd, who turned on Jesus and bayed for his blood. And we can think ‘of course, I would have stayed loyal; I wouldn’t have behaved like that.’

But even the disciples abandoned him in the face of all the hatred and vitriol. Would we have done better? I doubt I would: I think I’d have probably run too....

Because, let’s face it, the Kingdom Jesus came to establish still threatens the kingdoms of this world -- your kingdom and mine -- the kingdoms where greed, power, and lust rule instead of grace, mercy, and peace. And who among us really finds it easy to surrender our lives to that Kingdom and that King?

This climactic scene on that first Palm Sunday? This was pitting the light against the darkness. The people had to choose. Just as we must, too.

And I’m reminded of what I said during my first Lenten sermon this year. It’s all about making **right choices**.

When I was preparing for this sermon I had a picture. It was of a huge steep mountain. On one side was the mouth of a dark tunnel. On the other, a beautiful green lush valley abundant with food and flowing water.... The only way to the beautiful valley was through the dark tunnel that led through the heart of the mountain, the route full of twists and turns, both painful and frightening.

That's the path ahead of us to get from today to next Sunday. We can walk it with Jesus once again, consciously reminding ourselves of the huge and horrific sacrifice he paid – for us.

Or we can just pitch up next Sunday for the next party! The *choice* is ours....

Someone told me once why they don't like Lent. They said, "I'm not into suffering." Well Jesus wasn't into suffering either. Few of us are. You remember he prayed, "Let this cup pass from me." But when the time came for him to go on, the text says, "He set his face steadfastly for Jerusalem." That was *his* choice.

Following Jesus is costly. It requires of us commitment and purpose. There are no short cuts. We need to make right choices and get our priorities right. The journey isn't easy. But, it's the only true way to the beautiful green valley that is 'life in all its fullness'.

And we don't get there as an undisciplined crowd; we get there as a team – **TEAM JESUS**

Today we have with us members of two of our sister churches in the Auckland Diocese – Tuakau and Devonport. And the wonderful thing is that though we don't know them personally (yet), they too are on **TEAM JESUS!** We belong to a **global TEAM** that has members *everywhere*. Following the best coach in the universe!

Together we are united in our call to build God's Kingdom here on earth, one piece at a time....

Let us pray:

Lord, thank you for calling us onto your team.

Thank you for coaching us how to live.

Thank you for the sacrifice you made on our behalf.

Help us to perform well and play our very best game for you, day by day.

Amen.