

Lent 6

Palm Sunday

17th April 2011

Readings: Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29

Philippians 2: 5 – 11

Matthew 21:1-21:11

This week Tangi and I went to the movies and watched a film called “Get low” starring Robert Duval. Without giving too much away, it’s about a man who kind of lived on his own for quite some time; a bit like a hermit. Because of this, the people of his town had different opinions about who he really was and what he was really like. So being much

older and frail he decided to arrange his own funeral. It would, in fact, be a funeral party where he would attend while still being alive. He invited the whole town and offered to raffle off his house and land if people attended and would say something about him; of what they knew of him. It's a story about peoples' judgements of others without really knowing the truth about them; it's about how their understanding challenges the way they treat others.

Today, we remember again the story of Jesus' entry in to the city of Jerusalem. This Sunday is often called "Palm Sunday" or "Passion Sunday".

The dictionary says that passion is any strong or powerful emotion - it can be love, or anger, or hatred, or joy, or jealousy, or fear or reverence. We are beginning Holy Week today; the last week of Jesus' life. And all of those feelings: love, anger, hatred, joy, jealousy, fear and reverence were a very powerful part of what happened during the five short days before Jesus was killed. In fact the story of Jesus' death is sometimes called the Passion Story.

The story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a story about how peoples' understanding of Jesus affected the way they responded to him.

The streets of Jerusalem were buzzing and things would only get more intense as the week went on. The population of the city of Jerusalem swelled as the Passover approached. Rumours circulated that a young, but popular man from Galilee named Jesus would be there; the one who somehow raised a man, named Lazarus, from the dead. This Jesus drew crowds wherever he went. Unbelievable things were said about him; that he had fed 5000 people with five small loaves of bread and two fish; that he could make the blind see, the deaf hear, and the lame walk. He was not only a healer but also a man who could command demons to come out of

people and who claimed to have the authority to forgive sins. His teaching and ways were so counter-cultural that an unlikely alliance of the Scribes, Sadducees and Pharisees and even of Jew and Roman would be forged to rid the city of this young troublemaker.

While the establishment and local powers saw Jesus as a real or potential threat, the crowds saw him differently. As Matthew accounted, some perceived that a real live prophet of God was in their midst. They marvelled that a compassionate man who did the miraculous things was not a man after personal gain. Here was a simple man who identified with them. He was not ignorant of their pain and

suffering that disease, poverty, and oppression brought. He spoke of God, yet was a friend of the poor and outcast of society.

Others saw Jesus as a potential deliverer. He had healed others of their infirmities and amazingly restored life and wholeness to some. There was no doubt about this, but they wanted something grander than a person who worked on such a limited scale. If he could deliver one blind man, and ten lepers, and five-thousand hungry men from what afflicted them, why not deliver a whole nation from all its financial, social and political ills and troubles?

Others saw him as a fake, a charlatan, a person who worked slight of hand magic before the ignorant and untrained; one who would eventually use the masses to achieve his own personal ambition and goals. Yes, he was subtle and no, he hadn't given anyone proof of his intentions yet. In the minds of some people, Jesus was a sly one. But they knew it would only be a matter of time before Jesus would tip his hand, and then everything he did would be seen for what it really was; a ploy for ambition and power.

There were some who just didn't know enough about him to make any judgment. Sure, they had heard the stories and all, but

they were so far fetched and unbelievable to be true they thought. It wasn't that these people were necessarily cynical by nature like those who felt it was all a sham, but they just didn't know because they had not been personally touched by him. They didn't question that he has made an impact on the lives of others; it was just that he hadn't made any impact on their life. Maybe what they said about him was true and maybe it wasn't. Only time and personal experience would tell they thought.

In contrast to these, there were a few people who saw Jesus in a different light altogether. They saw him as more than a miracle worker

and reformer. They understood that he was called to be much more than a religious leader and teacher. He was a preacher and prophet, sacrifice and priest, and servant as well as king. In short, he was the Messiah that God had promised Israel centuries ago. Surely the deliverance that the nation of Israel had longed hoped and prayed for was at hand for the Son of David to lead the nation into world prominence again.

The crowd that watched Jesus that Sunday morning was made up of many types of people including believers, critics, curiosity seekers, cynics, sceptics, undecided, and those not interested; strangely not all that different

from people today. But then as he approached from Bethphage, the excitement of the crowd grew especially as they saw him riding on a colt of a donkey knowing that God's Messiah would come in such a way as Zechariah had prophesied some five centuries earlier.

As he approaches Jerusalem, the city erupts with excitement and the crowd gets caught up in the moment. They start casting down their cloaks on the road as well as freshly cut branches symbolizing the peace and victory they hoped he would bring to them as Judas Maccabaeus had done much earlier in restoring and cleansing the Temple and city from the Greek influences of Antiochus. The

people yelled out the words from Psalm 118:26, a messianic psalm, which talked about the success and celebration God's people would experience when he visited them with his salvation.

Yet on this happy joyous occasion when everything seemed to be going so right, people could not help but ask the question: "Who is this?" (Mt. 21:10). This question is asked by a "whole city" which "was in turmoil". The Greek word used here *seio* is the root for the word "seismic" that is used when talking about earthquakes. In a sense the people were 'shaken up' when Jesus entered their place; when Jesus entered their life.

Knowing who Jesus was in relation to them was challenging; so challenging that it stirred their very being. How they responded to Jesus depended on how they understood him.

On Palm or Passion Sunday, as the memory of Jesus once again re-enters your place, your life, are you stirred up or shaken inside about Jesus and what he means to you? Is there an excitement or nervousness about your relationship with Christ? Maybe you're still trying to figure out who and what Jesus means to you, and that's ok. But it doesn't stop Jesus entering that place or situation that challenges you and me about our response to him.

In the movie I saw, the man who arranged his own funeral wanted to know what people thought of him. He entered into the life of the town through the idea of his death. Very few knew him well; most knew hardly anything. But that didn't stop him from getting the whole town to respond to him.

So what's your response to Jesus? Is he someone you can cheer about – or not? Amen.