**Sermon Stowe Apr 10, Palm Sunday 2022**

Just under 4 years ago a group of pilgrims mainly from this Deanery walked down the steep road from the Mount of Olives to the Kidron Valley and then up the hill into Jerusalem. If it wasn’t the same road that Jesus travelled it is very close to it. The story we remember today is true. It happened in the place you can see today. But though we are told what happened on that day what should matter to us is how that story can relate to us today in C.21 Stowe.

Because though it’s the same place geographically the Palm Sunday story comes to us from a distant time and place involving people with different agendas and the context that we can only imagine. You’ve heard the reading again. If we look at this picture virtually nothing is like it was when Jesus walked down this slope. It would have been a dirt track. It had no street lights. We can see Jerusalem without the Jewish Temple but now dominated by a Muslim sanctuary, the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa mosque, no skyscrapers. It’s a city been destroyed and rebuilt; and grown hugely since Jesus’ time.

What is your reaction to the story, to the reading? How did you feel? Did you feel involved or were you like me and feet, if I’m honest, remote from it and not really related to it. To get towards its relevance to us we must dig a bit deeper. What was Jesus trying to do when he chose to enter Jerusalem like that? What did his followers feel as they walked beside him? Why did the crowds gather – did they appear spontaneous or were they organised? What did the authorities think and feel? Why is this story so important that it gets a Sunday every year to itself?

One important aspect of the answer came to me in an article by Angela Tilby, one time Canon of Oxford Cathedral. She wrote about identity. She wrote that identity is more than information about your gender, age, height, relationships skills and failings – all the sort of things that get recorded about you in official documents. It’s about who you are deep down inside. It’s about what you decide is important, the priorities you have that drive the decisions you take. Your identity is driven by your soul – a word not often used but fundamental to each of us.

Jesus, as he rode from Mount Olives to Jerusalem, was showing his identity to the world and challenging it to respond. He was saying ‘this is who I am, take it or leave it’ knowing that many would leave – as they still do. Jesus was a man whose whole being was driven by his desire to follow his Father’s will – and nothing else. No self interest, no ambition, no exclusive relationships. The occasion is full of symbolism that I’m sure Jesus was aware of. The donkey he rode was a sign of peace not power and authority. The palm branches and robes on the road were signs of respect and an acknowledgement of importance and significance. The crowd showed others how much popular support he had, even though they were almost certainly wrong about his ultimate intentions. The shouts of praise of Jesus and God were shouts of worship, not conflict. He was the original and only WYSIWYG man. (What You See is What You Get). The inner man that was Jesus showed itself on the outside. Would that any of us could claim it was true. We are torn by inner tensions. As St Paul said about his own failure to honestly and fully follow Jesus, “*the good that I would do, I don’t and the evil I should not do, I do. There is no health in me*”. And the same was true for the people we read about who walked with Jesus down the hill and up the other side.

The whole event was closely managed. Jesus knew where the donkey would come from. He knew there would be a crowd of pilgrims in Mount Olive ready to walk to Jerusalem who would be moved to shout for him and follow him. What did the disciples think? Their behaviour later that week shows they still could not grasp or accept Jesus’ mission. Would you have been one of them? The man who loaned the donkey; did he think he had done what was necessary for Jesus and life could go on as before? The people who stripped palm trees and put the branches on the road with their cloaks showed their respect and honour for Jesus; where were they later in the week? And I’m sure they picked up their cloaks when he had passed. What did the Scribes and Pharisees who watched this procession think about what was happening? Some of them, we know, were sympathetic supporters. But my guess is that most were hostile and fearful of the reaction of the Romans who held real power. The Romans themselves have no part in this story but I’m sure they were watching. Did they regard it as a small unimportant Jewish matter until they were forced to react when Jesus was brought before Pilate?

I want to ask you to think about where you fit into this confused complex scene. How would you have reacted? Here is my picture of people you know taking the same route into Jerusalem. Where would you have been? It all depends on your real, buried identity. We finish Lent today and enter Holy Week. Lent has been, or should have been, all about uncovering your real identity on your journey with and towards the Godhead; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Angela Tilby wrote that our identity, our soul, relates to our relationship with our creator God. It is not a fixed entity but a dynamic that can go forwards, upwards if you like, or backwards. We are on a spiritual journey. A theologian said “there is a problem with saying that we have a soul; we are a soul”. And souls do not come ready packed; they change as our relationship changes. The world, from a Christian perspective, is not the place where you preen yourself but a harsh testing valley of soulmaking. That description describes the journey on which Jesus set out and was close to completing as he rode into Jerusalem.

So as we think about Palm Sunday journey and the bravery and steadfastness of Jesus as he faced the end that he had seen from so far away and was so close to its completion, the challenge to you and me is to try as we face problems, challenges, dilemmas in our life to consciously try to show Jesus’ fortitude and love in the decisions that we have to make; to be his pilgrims on the road ahead.