**Sermon-Palm Sunday. Matt. 21: 1-11 & Ps. 118: 19-24**

1. Intro. I wonder what you make of Palm Sunday? It was the start of a tumultuous week for the Lord Jesus Christ-a switchback from the triumph of the Entry into Jerusalem to the apparent catastrophe of Good Friday & then the greater triumph of the Resurrection at Easter. The acclaim of Palm Sunday was the magnificent climax of His three years of ministry, as He came to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. No wonder the whole city was stirred Matt. 21: 10 , asking “Who is this?” There were 4 responses given then, which are echoed now. Firstly, He was just a Teacher or Rabbi-many thought this like the Rich Young Ruler in Matt. 19: 16 “Teacher what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”. Secondly, He was a prophet, for His followers believed & said “This is Jesus , the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” (v 11). Thirdly, His jubilant arrival & procession symbolised the entry of a King or Messiah or Deliverer. Martha had said “I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God…” Jn. 11: 27. Lastly, to the religious elite He was a provincial, out of town troublemaker from Nazareth-from the day Lazarus was raised “they plotted to take His life.” Jn. 11: 53. Which of these responses speaks to you?

Why was a Messiah so feared by the religious elite? Although hoped for & predicted since the Exile 600 years earlier, a Messiah’s arrival now would upset the apple cart for the influential classes. Since the Exile the Jews had been dominated & occupied by other nations except for the hundred years of semi freedom under the Maccabees. Consequently, Judea was an unruly & remote area, whose people resented these occupying powers-represented by the Romans from 63 BC. These tried puppet rulers like Herod & his family 40 BC-6 AD & then reverted to using the local elites to control the area with their own forces held in reserve. The Pakistanis use this method, inherited from the British, in the North West Frontier Province to this day. Everyone in Judea was twitchy-the Romans feared a successful uprising, the elites feared to lose privilege & power-the people were seething with resentment & so were always on the lookout for a potential Messiah. Was it any surprise that the demo & procession of Palm Sunday by an itinerant preacher from the back of beyond-Galilee would provoke anxious questions “What does this mean? Who is this?”

1. We must look more closely at the responses-firstly, the Teacher or Rabbi or Master was a familiar sight then with his group of followers. Jesus was called “Good Teacher” Lk. 18: 18. Yet was He more than this? His teaching was so much more searching, as the Sermon on the Mount showed. John the Baptist had only called for repentance. Secondly, the Prophet, as His followers said. Prophets were messengers, who, like Moses, experienced a call from God to show His view on the contemporary situation, which they had to proclaim-for instance Jeremiah urged his listeners to forsake other gods & return to the one true God who had delivered their forebears from Egypt. A prophet might foretell the future, as Jeremiah did-the Exile would last 70 years, which it did. He might, also, perform miracles as Elijah did with the widow’s son. Thirdly, the Messiah, the Anointed one, the Deliverer, the King. A number of people were convinced by the miraculous raising of Lazarus that Jesus was the Messiah-the Deliverer-the King. He had, of course, been teaching in His parables that the Kingdom of God was at hand, so that some of these assumed this was a material kingdom, a revived Jewish state. He, however, meant the phrase in the spiritual sense, that He was the King of people’s lives- a King, who would deliver them from sin’s consequences & the power of their sinful desires. His entry with a large procession into the city & the Temple had all the symbols of a King’s entry. This template is echoed in Ps118 with the King v19 speaking to the Levites at the gate “Open the gates of righteousness; I will enter to give thanks to the Lord”,-proclaiming his intentions “I will give thanks for you answered me…” v21 & supported by his followers declares “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice & be glad in it.”v24. His entry on a donkey echoed Zechariah 9: 9 “See, your King comes to you, righteous & having salvation gentle & riding on a donkey..”Donkeys were used by kings, if they came in peace-on horseback meant a conquest. Kings were not meant to use saddles-cloaks would do & it was important the donkey should never have had any other person riding on it before-perhaps, some sort of royal privilege! The cloaks & branches on the road were to protect the King from dirt like Raleigh with his cloak on the puddle to keep Queen Elizabeth l dryshod. The shouts of “Hosanna”-suggesting deliverance & praise completed the signs that this was the entry of the Deliverer, the King. Is it any wonder the whole city was stirred? The Lord Jesus certainly deserved it. The religious leaders became even twitchier. Would they lose control of events? They feared the people might be encouraged to revolt & all because of this troublemaker who must be destroyed.
2. As we reflect, today, on the relevance of the events of Palm Sunday, we could ask, as Jerusalem’s citizens did, “Who is this?” Firstly, are Jesus & His followers seen today as troublemakers? Certainly, anyone holding to Scriptural truths, whether a street preacher or the chaplain of a school, whose foundation was avowedly Christian, can find themselves accused of hate crimes & worthy of arrest or dismissal-virtue signalling to a vociferous influential group. Secondly, was He just a teacher? Previous generations would dismiss Him with faint praise, as urging high ethical standards not unlike those of the best of Buddhism or Islam. Thirdly, those more favourably disposed towards Him, might accept Him as a prophet. He did give God’s views as a sort of critique of contemporary society. Lastly, there are still those who take him at face value as Messiah, Deliverer & King. If we accept him as all of these, He delivers us from the consequences of sin in eternity & the power of sin, but we must accept Him as a King to be obeyed, so that He can transform us. He can be our shepherd & our friend, too. I wonder which of these responses seems most relevant to you? Clearly, He & his followers are seen by some as a troublemaker now, for the spirit of this age seems increasingly hostile. The pressures of changing circumstances can change our view of Him. Perhaps, in the run up to Easter & I say this as much to myself as to others, we should reflect on how far we accept Him, personally, as a teacher, or as just a prophet or a King & Deliverer-I hope it will be the last.