

There are a small number of stories about Jesus which are not only well known today but were predicted before they happened, hundreds of years before they happened. When we turn up to a Carol service at Christmas time we expect the opening reading or two to be from the Old Testament as it is there that we find the words of the prophets who made the predictions about the birth of Jesus Christ.

Those predictions were quite remarkable but there are three predictions about today, Palm Sunday or at least the first Palm Sunday which if anything are even more remarkable. We are told what will happen by the prophet Malachi, we are told where it will happen by the prophet Zechariah, and the most remarkable is we are told when it will happen by the prophet Daniel.

The first part of our reading from Luke's gospel could be called the presentation section, it is telling us what happened. That first prophecy – who? Malachi 3:1 “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”

And that first section is telling us what Jesus said should happen. You rather get the impression that by now the disciples had learned when Jesus says, “do something”, you simply do it. Remember the story when Jesus had been speaking to thousands of people and they were hungry and Jesus said let's feed the people.

And the disciples said but all we've got is this young boy and his loaves and fishes - that's not gonna get us very far is it. But Jesus told them what to do and they did it and everyone was fed. And then there was the time some of the fishermen amongst the disciples had been out fishing all night and had caught nothing and Jesus said go out again and cast your nets on the other side of the boat, and you can imagine them grumbling saying, “do you think we hadn't thought of that?”, but they did it and the boat nearly sank under the weight of the fish. And now Jesus is giving them very specific instructions about a donkey and they have learnt: they just did as they were told.

Do you sometimes think it would be really helpful if we are trying to work out what we should be doing and we pray to God to ask him for guidance? Wouldn't it be really helpful if we got such specific instructions. Do you want a job? Well go to the third building on the left and speak to the woman in the red dress and she will give you a job. That would be helpful. Or you need a car and God says go over to the car park and take one it'll be fine. Well perhaps not but you get the point.

But why such specific instructions? Because Jesus was not just turning up on a random day at a random place. Jesus had planned this a long time ago because he was fulfilling what the prophets said should happen. Zechariah Chapter 9 verse 9. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey. “

It was carefully planned. It was no sudden, impulsive action. Jesus did not leave things until the last moment. He had his arrangement with the owners of the colt.

“The Lord needs it”, was the password chosen long ago. But more than that it was a deliberate claim to be a king fulfilling that prophecy in Zechariah. When a king rode to war he rode on a horse; when he came in peace a king would come on a donkey. And now was the time to do this.

In the gospels there are many occasions when we got to the end of a story and thought why did he say or do that? Because at the end of the story when Jesus has performed a miracle Jesus said go, but don't tell anyone about this. Can you imagine what that must have been like for the person who had been healed? Fred you're better how did that happen? I can't tell you. How hard is that? And what about the time

when the crowds wanted to declare him as a king and Jesus just quietly withdrew? In all those cases the time was not right. But now the time is right.

So we now come to our second part of the story, verses 37 and 38 which are all about the celebration. Listen to an important word, 2 words actually in verse 37 which are, if you like, one of the side messages we should pick up from this story. "The whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices." When we worship God we should not worship in a half-hearted way: we should follow the example of these disciples in Jerusalem and worship him joyfully, loudly. Nobody was singing, 'Hosannah etc'.

And this is why. Whenever you sing or speak in praise to the lord of heaven and earth, the King of Kings do it with confidence. How many times does the bible say, "Shout joyfully to the Lord".

But to get back to the story, notice what they are singing. They are singing an extract from Psalm 118, the psalm we started our service with. Psalm 118 was a well known Messianic psalm, a well established psalm of the Messiah, and all the Jewish rabbis would have known that, so the crowd is bringing the words of the psalm to life as Jesus enter Jerusalem. And the other 3 gospel writers tell us another word the crowd sang – Hosannah - which means save us now, or deliver us now. And celebrate they did.

The 3rd part of the story is the consternation of the pharisees. The Pharisees know what is going on. They know that the crowd are welcoming the foretold Messiah. The crowd believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Pharisees do not. To me one of the key questions of the whole story of Jesus' ministry on earth comes down to this. Why did the Pharisees not believe that Jesus was the Messiah?

Surely they had been waiting for, longing for, the Messiah to come, but they did not believe this man could be him. This man who healed the sick. This man who clearly knew so much about God. This man who appeared to be fulfilling the prophecies of the coming Messiah that they knew off by heart. But isn't that the answer?

Those prophets said that the people would reject the Messiah, and so those Pharisees were themselves fulfilling a prophecy.

I love that verse 40 when the Pharisees were telling Jesus to tell the crowd to stop singing, "I tell you if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." And just imagine if Jesus had done what they asked. It could have been the world's first rock concert.

And now Jesus is forcing the Jewish leaders to act. By his very arrival as a King of peace into the holy city, Jesus is forcing the Pharisees to reject him. And they did.

And then we get to the fourth and final part of the story which is the Lamentation of Jesus. And here we get the contrast in what is going on. The crowd is rejoicing, but Jesus is weeping. Why is he crying? Because he is looking around at the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees, and he knows that in a few days time, some of those crowd who are rejoicing will be shouting crucify? And why will they be doing that? Because the Messiah who has come is the Messiah that God has sent rather than the Messiah that they think God should have sent – a warrior who will throw the Romans out of their land with violence rather than a man of peace. He has come on a donkey, not a horse. But he is also weeping because he is looking ahead at what's coming in 70AD where after 143 days of siege, and 600,000 dead in the streets, the temple and the city of Jerusalem, their holy city, will be destroyed.

But the most remarkable thing about this whole story is alluded to in verse 42 – “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes.” “On this day”. On this precise day. What Jesus is quoting from in his lament is the prophet Daniel – in particular Daniel 9 25-26. Now, the explanation behind what I’m going to tell you is long, complicated, and quite hard to follow, so I will read you this section from Daniel and then simply tell you where it fits into the story we are looking at today. If anyone wants to consider it further talk to me afterwards.

Daniel 20. “Learn and understand these things. A command will come to rebuild Jerusalem. The time from this command until the appointed leader comes will be forty-nine years and four hundred thirty-four years. Jerusalem will be rebuilt with streets and a trench filled with water around it, but it will be built in times of trouble. After the four hundred thirty-four years the appointed leader will be killed;.”

So, we are told in chapter 2 of the book of Nehemiah when King Artaxerxes gave the command to start rebuilding Jerusalem. It equates to March 14th 445BC.

Second, we have from Daniel’s prophecy 2 periods of time – we have forty nine years, which is how long it took to rebuild Jerusalem, and we have 434 years after that – so a total of 483 years to wait.

Third, it was always going to be the case that the Messiah would be killed on the feast of the Passover – the Pharisees wanted it to be left until after the Passover as they knew the prophecies, but they didn’t get their way. The Passover was on the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nisan, and Jesus arrived in Jerusalem 4 days before the Passover, on the 10th day of the Month of Nisan, or the date of April 6th 32AD.

If you work in days and go forward from the start of the rebuilding of Jerusalem for a period of 483 years, you get to April 6th 32AD – the precise date Jesus entered Jerusalem, was as prophesied by Daniel.

So we have the who, we have the how, and we have the when – all prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus even lived on earth.

Which leaves me with one question that I ask of all of you today. If God can arrange all these details so far in advance, when are we believers going to trust the Lord for our future? We worry so much about so many things and yet we are so reluctant to put our worries into the Lord’s hands and ask for his help. I don’t pretend that is easy. I also acknowledge that sometimes we can, if we are not careful, misunderstand the messages that God gives us – but if we carry on asking him, he will soon put us right. There is nothing wrong with an, “Are you sure about that?” type of prayer. Gideon asked the same question twice so I think we can do that too.

Do you know who is the most compliant one in the whole story? The donkey. Will you be like the donkey.

The donkey was a colt who had never been ridden before, and Jesus got on him and he just went. Oh to be like the donkey.

This week we are very much going to live the story of what happened next. At the last hour at the cross on Good Friday, and again at the Tenebrae service in the evening, we will live through those last days with Jesus so join us if you can. And then of course next Sunday we get to the most important day of the year for all Christians – it will be worth going through what is often a hard week, to get to Sunday.

Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father we realise there is so much to learn and understand from this story. Will you help us take our palm crosses and use them as a reminder of how we can and should trust you; how we can come to you for help and rely on you for the answer. As we relive those last days of Jesus' life on earth help us to hear and learn from the messages that you give us this week, and help us to use them to prepare for Sunday.

Amen.