

Hymns: **265** **“Ride on, ride on, in majesty!”**
 264 **“Make way, make way, for Christ the King”**
 779 **“Holy, holy, holy”**
 “Lift high the cross”

Readings: **Philippians 2:5-11**
 Mark 11:1-11

“HOSANNA”

Five years ago, on March 28th 2010 to be exact, I arrived in church from the Royal London Hospital where I'd just greeted our newly-born and only grandson. Later on today, doting grandparents will be enjoying little Thomas's birthday with due pomp and circumstance. I remember announcing to the congregation that the theme of Palm Sunday (if fell at this date then as now) had just been reproduced in my own life. Jesus riding into Jerusalem will always now be linked in my mind to the arrival of Thomas into this brave new world. Both will forever figure in my mind under the banner of “Triumphal Entry”.

I had time yesterday to think these thoughts and interweave them with another stream of consciousness. For yesterday was also the birthday of my grandmother (she would have been 131). My grandmother was also named Thomas! Grandmother Thomas and grandson Thomas – there's a coincidence for you!

The arrow of human history that has flown between these two births from 1884 to 2010, has flown fast and straight towards... towards what exactly?

Well, the time between those two points represents huge developments in world history;

- from the scramble for Africa (with the Berlin Conference that parcelled that continent out neatly to the European powers) to Arab Spring;
- it marks the rise and fall of many an Empire;
- it covers the ground from Das Kapital to Market Capitalism;
- from Theodor Herzl's Zionism to Benjamin Netanyahu's Jewish State;

- from manual labour to microchips with everything.

The period has been marked by a rapacious greed, wanton cruelty, a lust for power and a prodigious waste of the earth's resources.

The world seems to have set its face resolutely, like a flint, towards (self-) destruction, to be in love with death. Richard Dawkins, in one of his respectable writings, describes what he calls "the selfish gene" which predetermines the way we live. The title says it all.

The arrow of human history risks landing at the very heart of human hope – so many people are suffering, living in blitzed landscapes, deprived of such basic necessities as food and shelter, at the mercy of diseases that can be cured and early death. All our successes, discoveries, achievements, breakthroughs, (and there have been many of them) seem only to point the way to dusty death; the narrative of our accomplishments amounts to little more than a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying little more than nothing.

So much for my dismal meditation yesterday as I pondered the arc of history covered by those two birthdays, from grandma Thomas to grandson Thomas.

But for all the gloom and doom, there was a corner of my mind that was forever hopeful. It's the part that houses the story of Jesus and his donkey, the entry to Jerusalem, the braying of the beast and the baying of the crowd – "Hosanna, hosanna!" they shouted. So where and how did the story of Jesus interact with all that other stuff that filled the rest of my mind?

First of all, we note that the entry to Jerusalem marks the end point of a journey that had been announced since the ninth chapter of St Luke's gospel where we read that "he set his face resolutely, like a flint, towards Jerusalem." Ten whole chapters, about 40% of Luke's gospel, then follow and recount the various happenings along the way. What a journey that proved to be. There was:

- teaching – including the magisterial parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan;
- mission – the sending out of his apostles (twelve or seventy-two?) – his public relations team announcing his presence to all and sundry;

- healing – and not only of the medical variety – there was “social healing” too as he received unlikely people into close proximity with himself;
- challenge – he rounded on the pharisees, on the simple grounds that the religion which ought to well and bubble actively within them had atrophied and petrified, leaving the externals crustily on view while the innards were starved of sustenance;
- warning – reminding people that the path of faith was not without it’s difficult choices and its costly endeavour;
- inclusivity – with unlikely people like tax-collectors (including that unlovable squirt named Zacchaeus) and lepers, women and outcasts.

He couldn’t have made his case more clearly. The journey to Jerusalem was replete with all these facets of his personality, his message and his invitation to follow. Here I am, he was saying, I’m hiding nothing. Look at me and you’ll see exactly what I’m offering.

And then, secondly, he subverts all conventional notions of power, he dashes popular expectation. Jesus is no mere populist. As we undergo the rigours of a General Election campaign, we’ll hear our political leaders seeking to placate the electorate with all kinds of promises. They’ll be offering what they think people are clamouring for. There’s none of that with Jesus. They want some kind of celluloid hero, some kind of extra-terrestrial wonder-worker. Instead they’ve got him! And they’re about to see what it’s all going to cost him – with the obvious consequential question: do I really want to go where he’s going? But the clearest evidence of his subversive message was revealed by the simple act of getting onto a donkey. How plebeian, rustic, bohemian, droll and prole a thing to do! It certainly was not princely or magisterial, commanding or impressive. Anyone who’s ever ridden a donkey knows just how ridiculous it feels and looks.

And that’s the point. The very point. This man who has shown himself to be so wise, to possess such power, to present himself in such a charismatic and compelling way, to be so strong and to command such popular support, passes and expresses all his extraordinary attributes through the prism of Service. It’s through helping others and adding value to the life around him that he gives form and value to those characteristic qualities we see in him. The accumulation of power does not interest him. He finds a way to express power through the disposal and dispersal of power. He shows how self-realisation is best achieved through self-sacrifice, how anything that can be called success is achieved best through service.

It blows your mind.

And it challenges all those 1884-2010 tendencies that have brought the world to its knees.

The arrow has flown. It has landed in Jerusalem. It will lead to suffering and death. But death won't have the last word.

Love is something, if you give it away, you end up having more. And from the ground there blossoms red, life that shall endless be.

I began these remarks by mentioning an experience that took place five years ago. I spoke about the triumphal entry of grandson Thomas which sat alongside that morning's gospel message of the triumphal entry of Jesus to Jerusalem. It was a memorable day but that wasn't all. 19 days before that Palm Sunday, I'd undergone major surgery. I'd been given magnificent care under the aegis of our wonderful National Health Service. And I was back on my feet. I told the congregation that I'd be back in harness on the following Sunday – the day of resurrection itself.

Last week, five years after that experience, I've been informed that I am still clear of the disease and that my medical team would not want to see me again until the spring of 2018 – and I'll be out of your hair by then.

So here's another triumphal (not triumphalistic) entry that I need to signal here today. It gives me more time to win people's attention for the most wonderful story of them all. I'll praise my maker while I've breath and I thank God for the opportunity he gives me to do so. Amen.