

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Louise Burrows and I am part of the ministry team at La Côte Church. Today I am going to take you back in time to the events of Palm Sunday, the week before Easter. But first, I want to tell you a little bit about my father and his love of Shakespeare.

So, my father loves to quote Shakespeare; well actually, one particular quote from one particular play: Macbeth. As a school boy, he played the role of one of the three witches who gathered on the heath and spoke prophetic words over Macbeth at the beginning of the play. Firstly, the witches told Macbeth that he would become King. Secondly, they told him that no-one born of a woman could harm him. And thirdly, that no-one would vanquish him until Great Birnam wood came to Dunsinane.

This left Macbeth feeling invincible, since woods don't move about (except in Lord of the Rings) and surely no-one could harm him since everyone is born of a woman? Fast-forwarding to the end of the play, when Macbeth is indeed king, Great Birnam Wood does come to Dunsinane, in the form of branches carried by an army – an army led by Macduff, a man who was not technically born of a woman but rather 'untimely ripped', by caesarian section. The original prophecies were indeed fulfilled, *but not in the way that Macbeth expected*.

Our passage today is also about prophecy being fulfilled in an unexpected way. Let me set the scene. Jerusalem is occupied by Rome, an empire at the height of its power and heavily armed legions keep things firmly under control. The local population resents the occupation, does not accept the client king, Herod Antipas and resents Pax Romana – the peace that came after the all resistance was totally crushed. They are waiting for the messiah their prophets have promised them, a legitimate king, of the line of David, who will finally come and liberate them from the Romans, restore the temple and cleanse the land.

The city of Jerusalem is buzzing. Everyone within 20 miles of the city is legally obliged to gather and celebrate the Passover, and many others have also made the journey. The Jewish historian Josephus claimed that about 2.5 million people would have celebrated the Passover in Jerusalem – probably a wild exaggeration, but you get the idea!

At Passover, the Jews celebrate God delivering them from the Egyptians under Moses. A parallel desire to be free from the Romans is probably in the front of peoples' minds. The Romans are no doubt keeping a close eye on this unruly people at this sensitive point in the calendar.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, with crowds shouting hosanna, waving palm branches and laying down their cloaks for him. As Jesus is riding into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, it has been speculated that at about the same time Pilate might have entered the city from the other direction. *Just imagine* this parallel procession! Pilate riding in on a war horse with legions of Roman soldiers - an effective show of

force to intimidate potential rebels. While Pilate rides into the city on a war horse claiming Pax Romana over a people conquered by Rome, Jesus rides in on a borrowed donkey claiming Pax Christi over a people conquered by love.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all include the intriguing cameo about commandeering a young donkey, with the secret password 'the master needs it'. It looks like the procession into Jerusalem was deliberately choreographed, it didn't happen on a whim.

Why does Jesus go to these lengths to *process* into Jerusalem? Why doesn't he slip into the city quietly? He could easily hop off the donkey, away from the crowds and enter the city anonymously. But then as now, actions speak louder than words: think of Extinction Rebellion and their naked protest in the House of Commons. Jesus's ministry is escalating towards its climax. This procession into Jerusalem is an enacted prophesy, a forth-telling of who Jesus is and what he has come to do.

He is being deliberately provocative. He is clearly making a point, but what is it? There are aspects of his performance that would have spoken volumes to his audience at the time, but that we might easily miss.

For a start, he probably reminded people of Simon Maccabeus, a guerilla general who liberated the country from Seleucid rule. He entered Jerusalem "with praise and palm branches...and with hymns and songs" 200 years previously.

And then there is the location. So important when buying a house, but also when trying to make a statement. Imagine walking down the Protestant Shankill Road in Belfast at the height of the troubles. Now imagine doing that waving an Irish flag - you would be asking for trouble! And here we are with Jesus beginning his procession at the Mount of Olives. This is where Zechariah prophesied an apocalyptic battle would take place between Israel and her enemies. In the Jewish mind, we could be preparing for a major show-down.

The crowds lay garments on the ground, just as officers had done for Jehu when he was anointed king of Israel. The crowd are laying down their garments for Jesus, their anointed king.

And on top of all that, the crowd is crying out words from the royal Psalm 118 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord': Jesus is their king. The crowds cry 'Hosanna', 'save us now'.

What point is Jesus making? That he is the legitimate King of the Jews, unlike the client king Herod Antipas. That he has come to confront and to liberate. He seems set up to ride triumphantly into the city and fulfill his messianic destiny of delivering Israel from the Romans.

But then, there is that tricky detail about the young donkey. People would have remembered another quotation from Zechariah 'Shout aloud, daughter of Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding upon...a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem...and shall command peace to the nations.' Jesus is a king, riding on a donkey, proclaiming peace. A war-horse would have been more appropriate for a King come to liberate Israel from the Romans, but Jesus comes in peace.

Jesus takes the popular messianic images: the location pointing to a confrontation, the strewn garments pointing to his kingship, and the people crying to their saviour king, and shifts their meaning by riding on a colt. Yes, he is the messiah, but, he is coming in peace. He will not fulfill the peoples' dreams of deliverance from the Romans.

Just as Macbeth's expectations were confounded at the Battle of Dunsinane, so the crowd's expectations of their messiah were dashed. The city was thrown into turmoil - we can imagine the questions and confusion. What on earth was this Jesus going to do? In the end, he fell far short of their expectations. Maybe it isn't so difficult to understand the depth of disappointment that led to the crowds' baying for his blood on Good Friday.

Even today, this Jesus we follow doesn't always live up to our expectations. Jesus had a bigger mission then and the Christ of our faith has a bigger mission now. Like the crowds at the time, we might expect him to solve our problems for us. But Jesus' bigger mission couldn't be constrained by the crowd's desire for liberation from Rome, his mission was the liberation of the whole world. In these extraordinary times, how do we reconcile our expectations of Christ to swiftly end the pandemic and bring healing, with the reality of over-crowded hospitals and increasing numbers of deaths?

I think perhaps we have the key in the words 'the master needs it'. On one level, this was the password that liberated the colt. On another level, it is a profound statement about God and his relationship with us: the master needs *us*.

At our Bossey day, Dave Tomlinson talked about the same thing. He challenged the idea of an all-powerful God who pulls the strings of our lives: instead he gave us a picture of a God who is active within his creation, who works through people. The master needs *us*.

I want to thank Peta for passing on these words from Bishop NT Wright from a week ago in Time magazine, which I think fit rather well:

*READ It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope.*

God continues to work in many ways, through individuals, churches and beyond. We have seen wonderful acts of solidarity through the various channels that we get our news, and many of us have given and received care in our own community. The master needs us to keep on at this. These words also invite us to follow Christ through the ambiguity, disappointments and challenges of life, when our plans and God's don't match up: after all, God's plans are more than we can ever hope or imagine.

As Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, let us not grow weary of doing what is right during our confinement and beyond, as we rebuild our lives and our communities. I'd like to end with the prayer of St Francis, which I suggest we sing together – so please turn back to your order of service now, where you will find a link to a recording of the song 'Make me a channel of your peace'. Amen.