

## **Palm Sunday 2014: Matthew 21:1-11 'Christ the King' (Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> April 2014)**

I wonder how many of us get the chance to live our dreams? When I was young I dreamed of being John Robertson. I imagine few of you here today will have heard of this legend, but John Robertson was a tricky left-footed winger who played for my childhood heroes, Nottingham Forest. I'd decided to support Forest in the spring of 1978, when I was five years old and Forest were winning their first and only league title. It was a team full of players I loved, but my favourite was John Robertson. If Kevin Sheedy – another left-footed footballer who most of you won't have heard of – was once famously described as being able to 'open a tin of beans with his left foot' – then Robertson could open a tin and cook it as well. Indeed John scored the winning goal against FC Hamburg in the 1980 European Cup final, cutting in from the left after 19 minutes to score with his right – his right! – foot.

But the truth was I never lived that dream. For my 6<sup>th</sup> birthday I got my first Forest kit, a visual feast of tight-fitting red nylon: ah, those were the days. I practised for hours, day after day. I even learnt to play with my left foot, despite being naturally right-footed. But I just wasn't good enough to be a professional footballer.

But some people get the chance to live their dreams, don't they? If any of you watch programmes like X-Factor or all the various spin-offs, time and again you'll hear the same sort of quote from the finalists: 'I'm living the dream. I used to watch these people on telly, and now I'm on telly myself.'

Sometimes dreams do become reality. And sometimes dreams invade the thoughts of a nation, or a large group of people. One such dream was vocalised on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1963. Hundreds of thousands of people had marched on Washington DC in support of racial equality. A huge rally was held outside the White House, and at the climax of that rally, Dr Martin Luther King gave one of the most famous speeches of all time. If I say the words, 'I have a dream', many of you will immediately know what I'm referring to. Let me read some of that speech to you:

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."*

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*

*I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.*

*And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"*

Even here, in prosperous Milton Keynes 50 years later, I still find the hairs on my neck standing on end. And I want us to keep the words of this speech in mind as we look this morning at another great leader entering his capital city to fulfil the dreams of his people. You see there are lots of parallels here: an oppressed people, a leader arriving in the seat of power to disturb a hostile government, and a population dreaming of freedom. Only this time, it's 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, the city is Jerusalem and the leader is Jesus.

The story of Palm Sunday is a story most of us know well. The passage we had read is one many of us will have heard every year (follow it on page xxx). Jesus arrives on the outskirts of Jerusalem (v1), tells his disciples to go ahead of him and find a young donkey (v2-3). 'The Lord needs it!' (v3) – and Jesus rides it into Jerusalem, surrounded by crowds cheering and shouting and singing freedom songs. For that is what those songs are: they're freedom songs, just like the one Dr Luther King quoted. 'Free at last! Free at last!' Hosanna is the word used in Matthew's gospel and it means 'Save'. God come and save us! 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!' (v9)

The king is coming! The king has arrived! It's liberation time! (PAUSE) Now if you were a good Jew, you would know your bible, you'd know what Zechariah promised in 9:9 – the other passage this morning. But it's worth reading the verses around it, because Jesus coming in on a donkey would make no sense if you didn't know what would happen next: READ ZECH 9:v10,v16

What does the king who arrives on a donkey do? He sets the people free. He starts God's intervention to save his people. Freedom from the oppressors! War and victory. It's like Gideon or King David or Judas Maccabeus all over again, only better.

Jesus is making a statement here. A big statement. Yes, he's showing us that he's a different sort of king: gentle, humble. But Jesus knows his bible better than anyone. The Messiah who rescues his people arrives on a *donkey*. And this is the prelude to battle and victory: God is going to defeat his enemies and the enemies of his people. *That's* why the people are so excited. If you've ever wondered why they got so excited about a Jewish rabbi on a donkey, this is why. It's liberation time. These are **the peoples' dreams** – and Jesus is fulfilling them.

I wonder what you dream of? Do you dream of wealth, or power, or success? Or do you dream like the Jews did, of greater freedom: freedom from something that traps you, freedom to be yourself, freedom from needing to be popular, and wanting people to like you, freedom from exams and targets, freedom from the 9 to 5, or maybe the 8 to 7 as it is now. Freedom from money pressures, freedom from family pressures, from work pressures, from health pressures. Freedom from city life, freedom from boredom or loneliness.

And Jesus arrives and you look at him and you want him to meet all your expectations. You want the knight to arrive in shining armour and make every part of your life better. And you wave your palm branches and shout hosanna and load Jesus up with impossible expectations. It's so easy for us to make Jesus in *our* image, to want him to be the Messiah *we* want, the Saviour *we* want. And don't get me wrong, Jesus is more than able to set us free, that's what he came to do, that's what he still does.

But he doesn't sing to our tune. It's not the freedom you expected. It's harder, and messier, there's struggle and cost. We want a Messiah to make it all go away, now, with only a life of endless victory and pleasure. And we will have that, one day. Complete victory, fullness of life, glory. But as Winston Churchill famously said, it's a glory that comes through blood, and toil, and tears, and sweat.

Time and again we come back to the story of the gospels and find ourselves asking: What sort of Messiah are you, Jesus? And Jesus answers back from the page: *Not the sort you were expecting*. You see, we've seen the people's dreams. But we also see **God's reality**.

What does Jesus do when he arrives as the coming king? What would you do? I expect I would whip up the crowd into a frenzy of excitement, I would seize the moment. This is your time: rouse the army, strike the oppressor. I'd want Jesus to say something like Dr King's speech, to use the sort of words he used. That's a motivational speech, isn't it? That's the sort of thing to rouse the population to your cause. And it's the sort of thing we'd expect our great leaders to do, isn't it?

But what does Jesus do? Something very surprising. Something you wouldn't expect at all – at least not if you were trying to start a revolution. He attacks the very centre he was supposed to be coming to liberate. It's Passover week and the holiest site in the world is filled with hundreds, maybe thousands, of people. If revolution's going to start, it's going to start here. But what does Jesus do? READ v12. Strange, isn't it?

But Jesus knows what he's about. You see, the merchants put up all their tables in the court of the Gentiles, so that devout Jews could buy their offerings before going into the inner court – the court of the Jews. But that means there was nowhere for Gentiles to pray. That's why he was so cross: the temple couldn't fulfil its role to a spiritual centre for the whole world. That's why he says: READ v13.

So it makes sense – if you understood what sort of freedom Jesus was offering. But the people didn't, did they? They wanted a political king, a military Messiah. But this Jewish king is not only refusing to rouse an army or pursue violence: he is judging his people and embracing all nations! The sort of liberation he is offering is not the one they expect. And in 5 days' time they will kill him for it.

The people's dreams. God's reality. Jesus the King can and does meet all our dreams and desires: but not usually in the way we expect. So often we make him in our image. But this wild rabbi, this extraordinary, upside-down King always meets us on that road outside Jerusalem and challenges us to a new kind of life, a new kind of freedom. I have a dream, he says.

'I have a dream that one day all people will embrace the salvation I offer them. I have a dream that every man and woman will find that I hold the key to life and joy and fulfilment. I have a dream that Satan's power and the power of all evil will be destroyed. I have a dream that my people will lay themselves down for me as I lay down for them, carrying their cross in order that they might experience my glory. I have a dream that you will all recognise that freedom is not primarily freedom from or freedom to but freedom for: freedom for the purpose of life, love, holiness and human flourishing. I have a dream that all nations will join these Jewish disciples shouting and praising my name.

I have a dream...' And because Jesus God's Son, his dreams will become reality. Not the reality many of us expected, but the one reality for which the universe was created. The one reality worth living and dying for. The one reality so great, so important, so energising, that even if we kept quiet, 'the stones themselves would cry out.'

That's Jesus' dream. That's his reality. Is it your dream? Will it be your reality?