

SERMON: Palm Sunday, 9 April 2017 – Rev Dr Brenda Robson

“Who is this?”

Psalm 118:19–29

Matthew 21:1–11

Who is this?

It seems that this question was asked about Jesus from the time of his immaculate conception.

Joseph was probably the first to ask the question, during Mary’s pregnancy. His fiancée was pregnant and the child was not his. The angel told Joseph in a dream that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus was born the visitors, the shepherds and the wise men, came to see him and worship him as their new born king. They brought gifts fit for a king. It was Herod who asked the question, who is this baby? And with deadly results as he killed all the infant boys in the land in an attempt to get rid of this new king who might one day threaten his power and authority.

When Jesus was 12 years old, he became separated from his parents as they returned from celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem. They found him in the temple surrounded by the priests and teachers who were amazed at his knowledge and understanding of scripture - no doubt, they were asking, “Who is this child?” (Luke 2:41)

Early in his ministry Jesus went into the Synagogue in his home town of Nazareth and stood up to read the scroll of the prophet Isaiah – Isaiah 61:1-2

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

Jesus then told them “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4: 14–30)

The people were amazed at his authority and asked “Who is this man? Is he not Joseph’s son?” They did not want to hear and they threatened to kill him, running him out of his home town.

Later, Jesus turned the question on its head when he asked the disciples “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?”

he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

When Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he was saying very clearly that he was the long awaited king, the Messiah, Lord of all. The crowd were asking “Who is this?” and he gave them four answers in what he said and what he did.

Firstly, he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, a young colt in fulfilment of the words of the prophet Zechariah – **Say to the daughter of Zion, See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**” (Zechariah 9:9).

There is a further clue in the next verse, Zechariah 9:10 – God says **“I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem. And the bow of war will be cut off. And he (Jesus) will speak peace to the nations and his kingship will be from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth.”**

The same verse from The Message is perhaps clearer – God says **“I’ve had it with war – no more chariots in Ephraim, no more war horses in Jerusalem, no more swords and spears, bows and arrows. He (Jesus) will offer peace to the nations, a peaceful rule worldwide, from the four winds to the seven seas.”**

A clear indication that the one riding on the donkey is the king of kings who has come to save all peoples and all nations, not just the Jews.

The waving of palm branches and the laying down of cloaks for Jesus to ride over were symbols of welcome for a king.

Secondly, Jesus cleansed the temple by driving out the money lenders and thieves. In doing so, Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7. Let’s look at three verses – Isaiah 56: 6, 7 & 8 –

6

And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—

7

these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”

8

The Sovereign Lord declares— he who gathers the exiles of Israel: “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.”

Again Jesus is identifying himself with the Messiah of the prophet, the one who would come to gather together all peoples, not just the Jews.

Thirdly, Jesus healed the blind and the lame in the temple. No hiding away, no telling the healed individuals to go away and not tell anyone who healed them. This time he is healing right in front of the priests and the teachers of the law. They could not ignore him. Jesus is saying “Bring it on!”

In underlining his healing ministry, Jesus is fulfilling the prophesy in Isaiah 35: 3 –6:

3

Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;

4

say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”

5

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

6

Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

The teachers of the law knew their scriptures, they would know what Jesus doing and saying.

Earlier, when John the Baptist was in prison and sent his followers to make sure that Jesus was the Messiah, the coming King of Israel, Jesus replied “**Go back and report to John what you hear and see; the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor.**” (Matthew 11:4–5). In other words, “Yes, I am the King.”

Jesus’ healing powers were proof of his kingship and satisfied John’s enquiry. His healing powers directly challenged the Jewish leaders.

Fourthly, Jesus accepted the praises of the children as though he was God. When the teachers of the law are angry and indignant at the children shouting “**Hosanna to the Son of David**” Jesus replies by quoting Psalm 8 : 2 – “**From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise.**” Now the psalm was referring to children praising God and yet Jesus accepted these praises himself, as if he was God.

And so four answers to the question “Who is this?” all pointing to Jesus as King – riding on a donkey, cleansing the temple, healing the blind and lame and accepting the praises of his people in words previously reserved for God himself.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem did not go unnoticed then. It was not meant to go unnoticed. Perhaps Jesus was deliberately provoking the Jewish leaders into arresting him, after all they had been plotting his death for some time. Jesus knew

the time had arrived and he was no longer cautious or attempting to conceal his actions and teaching.

Matthew refers to the whole city being “stirred” by the entry of Jesus through the city gate. He uses the same word for “stirred” as he did for the earthquake that shook the ground when Jesus died on the cross so it was a mighty stirring indeed.

Now it occurs to me that were two men already in Jerusalem that day whose lives would be changed because of Jesus, two men languishing in prison, two men on death row awaiting execution. One was Barabbas and the other is simply known as the thief on the cross.

Barabbas was accused of insurrection and murder. He might have been a rebel leader fighting against the Romans. He was well-known and notorious. His days were numbered, he was in chains and he expected to be executed imminently. During Jesus’ trial Pilate offered to set one prisoner free, Barabbas or Jesus and, of course, we know that the crowd chose to release Barabbas.

We do not know what happened to Barabbas thereafter. On the face of it, he was given his freedom. One tradition has Barabbas as a witness on Golgotha hill as Jesus was crucified. Another suggests he was eventually killed when he led another uprising.

On the face of it, the thief on the cross did not gain his freedom and he was crucified alongside Jesus. And yet he gained the greatest freedom of all, forgiveness of sin at the eleventh hour, a place in paradise with Jesus that very day, eternal life in heaven.

Thank God for the thief on the cross. He has brought hope to countless people who look at his life of sin and his place in heaven.

Hope for people who are burdened by their past sins and feelings of unworthiness and hopelessness. Nothing is too much for Jesus to bear and to forgive.

People who have turned their backs on Jesus and on their deathbeds turn back to him and acknowledge him and speak his name. It is never too late.

I was given a book by a friend a couple of weeks ago entitled “Heaven, How I Got There – The story of the thief on the cross” by Colin Smith, written in 2015.

The book begins at 6 am on the morning of the crucifixion, Good Friday and then proceeds through the day. By midday he is saved. He hears Jesus say “Father forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing” and he thinks, if Jesus can forgive his enemies who have tortured him and are killing him, perhaps he too can be forgiven.

When the other criminal on the third cross shouts abuse at Jesus, the thief says “Don’t you fear God since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Colin Smith expresses what the thief might have said when he made it to heaven – page 43:

Entrance into heaven is a gift. You don’t earn it. You can’t deserve it. But you can receive it.

My story is unusual, to say the least, but it teaches something that everyone needs to know: entrance into heaven does not depend on your performance in the Christian life.

Think about what happened to me: I trusted Jesus and went to heaven on the same day. I missed out the entire Christian life!

I had no battles with temptation and no struggles with prayer. I never had the opportunity to be baptized, to receive communion, to join a church, to make a donation or to serve in ministry.

Since I’ve been here in heaven I’ve learned that many people on earth believe that their entrance into heaven depends on living a good and godly life. They may believe that Jesus forgives but deep down they feel that their progress in The Christian life is the key that will open the door of heaven.

How could that possibly be true?

I went to heaven *without ever living the Christian life!* I didn’t have the opportunity. With my hands fixed to the cross, I was in no position to do good works. With my feet nailed to a wooden beam, I could hardly walk the paths of righteousness! And with death only hours away, there was no time for me to turn over a new leaf and live a better life.

You too need to know this; your entrance into heaven does not depend on how well you live the Christian life. If that were true, there would be no hope for me or for you. We can’t live the Christian life well enough to deserve heaven. Nobody can.

Here’s what I discovered: heaven does not depend on what you do for Christ but on what he has done for you. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Amen