

Reflective Worship for Palm Sunday

Caleb's Story – part 1

John 12:12-18

Yes – I guess you could say we live on the edge of the city. Bethphage isn't far from Bethany, and neither of them are more than a couple of miles away from the Temple, the heart of Jerusalem.

The Temple. Not just the heart of the city, but the heart of our faith. The very dwelling place of God. Here amongst mortals. Still takes my breath away, just to think about it.

Quite apart from being my family home from generations back, it suits me here, on the edge. I've never been a great one for joining in, if I'm honest. One of those men who feels more comfortable keeping my own counsel. Happier to observe than to jump in feet first. Don't get me wrong. I'm not a miserable old so- and-so who doesn't like a good chinwag with friends, and even a glass or so of good wine – but I like the old ways. They suited my father, and his father before him, and for all I know, his father before him.

“Work, worship, and watch what you say”. If I had a motto, that would be it. Steady.

Well, mostly steady. There have been two occasions in my life when I have “jumped in.”

The first was when I married my wife, Miriam. Her family come from up Galilee way, and have some centuries-old connection to mine. Not close, but close enough for us to offer them hospitality on the odd occasion when they come up to the Temple to worship. The first year Miriam came with them I was captivated. She was so full of life, interested in everything that was going on, smiling and asking me questions. By the time they went back to Galilee we were betrothed, and the following year we were married.

She's 'on the edge' in a different way. Always finding things out. Exploring new ideas. Pushing boundaries. Took some getting used to, but I love her and she loves me, and together we make it work.

Anyway, you don't want to hear about all that. I expect you want to find out how Jesus of Nazareth came to ride my donkey that day.

Miriam had got wind of this Jesus some time back, from her Galilee connections. She was very taken with what she heard. She's a God-fearing woman, and worships the Living God in the way that she should, but she doesn't have a lot of time for the religious leaders – 'hypocrites', she calls them – and she's not a big fan of the Romans either. Well, none of us are to be honest, but this close to the garrison it pays to keep your eyes down and your mouth shut. Their crucifixion ground is not a place you want to end up.

It was all very well when this Jesus was up in the north, but when he started visiting Jerusalem he took up with a family in Bethany - Lazarus, and his sisters, Martha and Mary - who Miriam knew quite well.

And soon Miriam was full of stories about him. About how he'd healed a blind man near Jericho. About how he'd befriended a notorious tax-collector there, and how that sinner had repented and turned back to God and repaid everyone he had cheated. About his teachings – reinterpreting our holy scriptures so they focussed on life, and love, and respect and care for others, rather than on rules and regulations.

I wasn't sure. "You know where you are with rules," I said. "You're either right or wrong, no quibbling. If it says 'don't work on the Sabbath' and you don't, then you know you're alright."

"But what counts as work, Caleb?" she said. "Surely giving sight to the blind isn't work? Isn't it a good thing? Healing. Showing God's goodness. Showing God's love?"

I said no more. But I thought about it. And the more I thought, the more I came round to what she was saying. After all, didn't the prophets tell us that God requires mercy not sacrifice? Healing a blind man seemed like mercy to me. Even if I knew the Pharisees wouldn't see it that way.

So, I told you that Miriam was friends with Mary and Martha. What I didn't say was that Lazarus was my father's father's cousin's grandson. Which makes us some sort of relative. And so, when he died, we found out pretty sharpish.

Of course, we had to visit. It was the custom, and anyway, I wanted to. Lazarus had been a good man and it was only right to go and comfort his sisters. They would be destitute now, with no man to support them; and it was the family's business to make sure they were taken care of.

As we walked, I innocently commented to Miriam that it was a shame that that Jesus fellow hadn't been around to heal Lazarus. She didn't reply. Just gave me a look I didn't comprehend – something between anger and pain. Then her face crumpled and I thought she was about to begin weeping. I had the sense I had missed something. Had she been about to say something and thought better of it? I let it pass. "Work, worship, and watch what you say."

So the period of mourning passed. By this time I'd all but forgotten that Jesus person – so much emotion. So much going on. So much to sort out.

And then – well, I hardly know how to describe what happened. It was the fourth day after Lazarus had died. We were standing by the tomb, conducting the mourning rites, when there was a commotion and Martha and Mary appeared with a man who I realised must be this very Jesus who I had heard so much about.

My first impression was that he was very ordinary. No airs or graces. Just another bereaved Jewish man. But somehow it came to me that he was extraordinary in that ordinariness. I'm not a man given to poetic words, but it seemed like love and peace just radiated from him. And calm. In the face of all that chaos, wailing, crying, death and destruction, he knew what the outcome would be.

People crowded round. I was pushed to the back, I heard a grating sound like a heavy stone being rolled aside, then a voice – "Lazarus, come out!"

And – glory to God in the highest heaven. Lazarus did. Restored to life. Unwrapped from his grave-clothes. Re-united with his sisters.

The crowd rushed forwards. Suddenly I found myself alone. And the man Jesus turned and looked right at me. And something moved inside me as surely as that stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, and I knew that I was known. All the good bits. All the bad bits too. All the desire to be true to the one true God. All the failures to live up to that. Everything about me – in that one split second – seen. And here's the thing – not just 'seen', but welcomed. Approved. Loved – even.

We talked a lot about Jesus on the way home that night. I couldn't hear enough.

And that was the second time in my life that I jumped in.

Over the next week or so we spent as much time as we could with his followers, talking about what we'd seen, rejoicing that the Messiah had come at last, speculating as to what his next move would be.

So when, a week later, two of them turned up and took the donkey colt, I just nodded, called for Miriam, grabbed a cloak, and followed on. We spread cloaks on the donkey, and Jesus sat on them. We spread cloaks on the roadway, and Jesus rode the donkey down the hill and into the city. We pulled branches from the trees and shouted and yelled, "Hosanna!" "Save us, Jesus, save us!" It was like a triumphal procession to welcome the new King of the Jews into his city. It seemed as if the Romans and the oppressive religious leaders were on their way out, and Jesus' new kingdom of love, and mercy, justice and peace was about to begin.

Yet even as the crowds grew and the noise swelled, I began to feel uneasy. Close to Jesus all was light. But on the edge of the crowd, a tangible darkness was gathering. No-one else seemed to notice it, but then I'm used to being on the edge. It's a good place to see things from.

We flowed down into the Temple. Jesus threw out the swindlers and shysters – the cheats who made a tidy living from overcharging for the coin we needed to buy sacrificially clean animals for worship. We all cheered. An obstacle to worshipping God removed. What would be next?

Expelling the religious leaders? Raising an army to drive out the Romans?

But then – he was gone. Slipped away. Standing on the edge, I saw him go. And with him went the light and the life. The men who had come for the donkey saw me and handed me the leading rope. Slowly the crowd began to slip away. The religious authorities emerged. The soldiers stood alert all around. The donkey nuzzled close to me, as if seeking reassurance.

The darkness began to tighten its noose.

[We will continue with Caleb's story on Wednesday...]

Response:

In the story, Caleb became aware that Jesus was looking at him – seeing him, we might say. I wonder what that might have been like?

For the next few minutes I'm going to take us through what you might call a 'guided meditation' as we ponder that question...

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I wonder how we feel about being fully 'seen' by Jesus? Do we open ourselves up to his gaze? Do we feel uncomfortable, vulnerable? Do we turn away a little? Take a tentative step forward? How do you feel? How do you respond?

And then, I wonder how Jesus feels when he looks at us, as he looked at Caleb in the story?

Can you allow yourself to accept his welcome? His approval? His love?

Sing: Such love

Wrap up – if it raised difficult thoughts or questions, please speak to someone.....