

Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield
The Sixth Sunday of Lent, 28th of March 2010

Luke 19:28-40

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. The Romans were in power. What they demanded, happened. Even if meant a young couple travelling while the woman was heavily pregnant. Even if it meant that she gave birth far from home. After all, the Romans ruled the world. And yet, whatever the Emperor Augustus might have thought, however he might have been acclaimed, he wasn't the world's saviour. It wasn't Rome that would bring the world peace. The baby born to that young woman would bring down the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly; the one who would fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty. At his birth the angels sang: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

When that baby had grown into a man, he went to the synagogue at Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." At first the people listening spoke well of him, but soon the mood changed. They thought that having a local boy as a prophet would be particularly good news for them, that he would have a special loyalty towards his hometown. But he didn't. He told them: "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town," and spoke of the Gentiles to whom the prophets Elijah and Elisha had ministered. His good news was for the whole world, not just the people of Israel. So they were enraged, and tried to kill him. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

He continued to proclaim the good news of the coming of God's kingdom in the synagogues. He healed the sick, and freed people from demons. People began to follow him and he taught them what this new kingdom would mean, how it turned the values of the world upside down: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets." He told his disciples to love their enemies, do good to those who hated them, bless those who cursed them, pray for those who abused them. He told them of a new way to live, and lived that new way out himself. Those who followed him knew that this new way was the way of God, because they saw God in the deeds of power he did. God had come to them in the person of this man.

When they journeyed with him to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, they rejoiced, praising God joyfully with loud voices for all the deeds of power that they had seen. They echoed the words of the angels at his birth: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" They called him king, and signified their loyalty and obedience to him by laying down their cloaks on the road, but they knew he was very different from Caesar and his governor, Pilate, or the puppet king Herod. They placed him on a colt, rather than a warhorse, because this man was no warrior. In their praise of him there was no mention of his ancestor David, and no branches were cut from trees, because that would have suggested that this man was the king of the nation. This man would rule not one nation, but the entire world. And not just the human world. The whole creation was waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. If the disciples had been silent the very stones would have cried out.

It was a journey of great joy for the disciples. But there was a shadow over it. Before they had even entered the city, the mood changed. As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden

from your eyes.” As he had set out for Jerusalem he had lamented: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Now he, like the prophets who preceded him, was going to Jerusalem to his death.

Death was approaching, but this death would not be a sign of defeat. The chief priests and the scribes would lie about him to Pilate, saying: “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.” Rome would execute him as a terrorist, in the most painful way possible, as a deterrent to all those who rebelled against its power. His acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, would stand at a distance, watching. It would look as though all hope was lost. And yet this defeat was a victory.

The early church sang: “Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” It looked as though Rome had won. The Emperor Augustus might demand a registration and make all the world obey; the Governor Pilate might have the power of life and death and execute those who threatened Rome. But ultimately the world does not belong to the political powers, and violence does not succeed. The motley group of disciples singing “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” had got it right. God had come calling on Jerusalem, and God’s glory was seen on the cross.

Over this next week we will witness God’s glory in all its forms, in death and the new life that follows, in an apparent defeat that is in fact the ultimate victory. “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!” Amen.