

## A POWERFUL SIGN

Some of you will have seen pictures on Whatsapp of our granddaughter Connie, who lives in Norfolk. She is nearly 15 months old now and is just starting to walk a few steps. One of the things she likes doing is watching "dancing fruit" on the TV. There seems to be an infinite variety of cartoon pieces of fruit and vegetables who are choreographed to dance and move across the screen to a variety of pieces of music. Whilst she is watching, she starts to "jiggle" in time with the music.

In the last verse from the Luke reading we hear Jesus say, in response to the Pharisees request for him to stop the disciples and the crowd from shouting "Hosannah - Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Jesus says: "if you stop them even the stones will cry out".

Now I don't think Jesus had in mind some choreographed cartoon stones dancing across a TV screen !

What he was saying was that even creation understands more about what was going on than the pharisees and that whatever they might do to close down the party and whatever suffering they might inflict on him, they would not be able to stop or suppress his message, that the Kingdom of God is here and that Jesus's purpose was to demonstrate the kingship of God, in terms of love, forgiveness and service. He comes as a servant King, not as a warrior - liberator and to demonstrate that it is possible to live, love and serve God and each other, even in the most difficult of times. This is Jesus' powerful sign - and that come what may his message will prevail.

This passion week is all about choices. Jesus's choice to trust God and follow his destiny, come what may. Pilot's choice to let Jesus go or not. Herod's choice to send Jesus back to Pilot. The choice of the Roman soldiers to carry out their orders. The choice of Judas to betray Jesus or not. The choice of Peter to deny Jesus.

And here, Jesus presents the Pharisees with a choice. The choice of whether they should either accept Jesus as the son of God and welcome him as the Messiah referred to in the scriptures, or should they continue on the path they were set upon, trying to silence him and maintain the status quo in order to remain in power.

We know what choice they made - despite the injustices and violence of the Roman occupation, they chose to put their own positions over that of the people. Their own needs and desires blinded them to both Jesus's nature and purpose and his relation to God and also blinded them to the needs and desires of the people. This was a sign of their priorities.

And wherever the Gospel has been taken, this same choice has been presented to everyone who has heard it. Accept Jesus as the Messiah - as God's son - and become his disciple, following his way of love and service and accepting his forgiveness OR put your own needs and agenda first and so reject him and crucify him again. The outcome of that decision is a sign of where our allegiance lies.

Over the centuries, on a grand scale, however, they have come to power, we can see that this is what all the world's dictators have done - their overriding desire is to satisfy their own needs for control and wealth and status - ignoring the needs and desires of the populations they rule. I don't need to list them but the latest in line is obviously Putin.

Although the character of his war is on a different scale to the times of Jesus - more soldiers and more powerful weapons mean that more destruction can be perpetrated in a much shorter time and Putin can be more cowardly as he sits safely in an office in the Kremlin thousands of miles from the action dictating what is happening, rather than having to lead his troops into battle on horse back. But on the other side there is social media and the courage of the people staying and sending messages and the bravery of the news reporters ensuring that pictures and descriptions of what is happening can be sent immediately all round the world. And so however slow or inadequate we may feel the West's response has been, there is a collective build up of global resistance that in the past could not have been envisaged. All these actions are signs of people's intentions and priorities.

But like all dictatorial regimes in the past, I believe this will also ultimately fail, though not before much needless suffering has been inflicted. As Jesus suffered and was resurrected, though changed, so too will Ukraine emerge, though perhaps not exactly as before the invasion.

And so we too are given a choice. Do we believe and accept Jesus as the Son of God and are we willing to follow his way of love and service, tackling injustice and speaking out as the opportunities arise, come what may, or are we blinded as we put our own needs and desires first ? Do we shout Hosanna today and crucify tomorrow or can we be faithful daily, showing our love in the service of our Lord, and sharing his message of discipleship with anyone who will listen ? Our response is the outward sign of our priorities and where our commitments lie.

Amen