

Readings Psalm 1
Matthew 22. 34-46

Sermon

There's nothing worse than being woken up from a deep sleep. You could not help but hear the incessant rattling of the gate, donkeys braying, sounds of a couple of men arguing amongst themselves, and the dig in the ribs and command of 'you go' from the wife settled it. Not how I like to start the day, but start it did. Grabbing my robe around me I staggered out of bed and poked my head out of the door of our home.

After blinking and rubbing my eyes I saw them. Two rowdies from Galilee, fishermen by the looks of their clothes, struggling with the knot that kept my donkeys secure. The donkeys would normally be safe inside the stable, but yesterday was Sabbath and the law requires me not to work, not to even move my donkeys at all. And yesterday I was running late, I had taken my donkeys loaded with olive oil into the city and had struggled with the crowds. This would be a massive Passover, a week before the festival and already the city was full of visitors from all over the empire - Jews from every corner of the world.

On any other day I would have put the donkeys into the stable anyway, but the neighbours were outside. They were all ready for Sabbath, staring at the sunset and making a point of wishing me a blessed Sabbath. So the donkeys were tied to the gate, and I dashed in to be reminded of the time, yet again.

So there they stayed for the rest of Sabbath. My family celebrated as the law requires, we shared the meal, and went to worship. Temple was full next morning, I could only just hear the prayers but I went as I should, and made sure my family went too.

After the service I left to fight through the crowds of Jewish men to find my family in the outer precinct, and make our way back to our home at Bethphage at the Mount of Olives. Nothing unusual had happened during the rest of that day, apart from me forgetting to put the donkeys in the stable, but what was one more night they seemed happy enough.

I regretted that oversight as I stared at those two vagabonds trying to steal my donkeys. I could never remember the details of all the laws the pharisees kept listing but I knew stealing was one of the big ten.

So grabbing my clothes around me I stormed out of my house towards the two thieves, how dare they steal from me, and just as I was about to scream at them and have the whole neighbourhood up to witness their crime - one of them raised his head to look at me. No look of alarm, no fear in his eyes, no move to run away - he just looked up and my gaze met his.

This caught me off guard, you expect a thief to behave as a thief, but he just calmly looked up and smiled at me. Then he tapped his partner's shoulder and pointed toward me. So there was I, my night clothes gripped around me, rudely awoken from a peaceful nights sleep, ready to chase off thieves, being faced by two men who

calmly stood by my donkeys smiling at me. After a moment one of them spoke: 'The Lord needs them.'

Why I do not know, but in that moment this sounded like the most natural thing for them to say. I felt this sudden sense of peace, my anger vanished and I gently walked over to the gate, untied my donkeys, and passed the rope to them. They waved goodbye and walked off.

I stared after them, smiling, then I noticed my clothes, the absence of my two donkeys, and my neighbours starting to come out to see what was going on. I rushed back inside the house, throwing on my clothes, shouting 'My donkeys, the Lord, the donkeys were needed, the Lord wanted my donkeys!'

My wife and my children stared at me as if I had gone mad, and as I raced out of the house chasing after my donkeys they got dressed and followed to see what was going on, and to make sure I was alright.

When I got to the edge of the village I saw a huge crowd had gathered, people were waving palm leaves, throwing their clothes on the ground, shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!", and in the middle of all this were my donkeys and a man was riding them.

At a distance I followed the crowd into Jerusalem, trying my best to keep up and see where my donkeys and the man riding them were. At one point we paused and I managed to ask: "Who is this?" and the answer came back, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

I had heard stories about this man, but had never seen him or heard him for myself. So I kept following. He rode my donkeys right through the city to the very gates of the temple. There he got off and entered the outer precinct, one of the men near him paused and tied my donkeys to the gate. He seemed to stare into the distance and smile as he did it.

As I passed through the gate I patted my donkeys and noticed they were tied to the gate with a bowline, a fisherman's knot.

As I entered the Temple precinct I expected a crowd, the bustle of people, stall holders shouting their wares, money changers calling out their exchange rates, people haggling, animals filling pens and being dragged towards the centre of the Temple.

The crowd was silent. They had formed an open space and people holding palm leaves, their coats under their arms, stared at the scene before them. The traders in the precinct were all pushing against the crowd, trying to break out into the people, away from the chaos behind them.

I was caught at the back of the crowd, I caught glimpses of overturned tables, coins on the floor, animals wandering away from their pens, doves and pigeons flapping in their cages. The back of the man's head, the Lord who needed my donkeys, Jesus

from Nazareth, throwing tables over, chasing the traders and declaring: "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers."

For a moment I thought that was a cheek after he got his lads to steal my donkeys, but then the crowd surged. The blind, lame, the sick all came towards him, some walked or dragged themselves, others were carried by friends. I heard shouts of joy and people praising God, I saw the look of disapproval on the faces of our leaders - the keepers of the law. This Jesus seems to be helping people, but there must be something wrong if our leaders disapprove?

I was confused, so I made my way through the crowd and out of the Temple, untied my donkeys, met my family, and made my way home. That night my sleep was not peaceful, images of the previous day flashed before me. The smile of the donkey thief, the crowds waving palms, shouts of hosanna, the chaos of the Temple, the shouts of joy of the lame walking, the blind seeing, the figure of the man riding my donkeys, overturning tables, healing the sick, and the frowns of the pharisees.

What law was being broken? He interrupted Temple business, but he healed people - is this man Jesus following God's law or not?

The next day I was up early and went to my field to loose myself in work. I moved through my trees picking olives, losing myself in the monotony of the task, until my basket was filled. Then I heard the bray of one of the donkeys and my thoughts immediately went back to yesterday. I left the basket in the middle of the field and made my way down into Jerusalem, back to the Temple.

There seemed to be even more people crammed into the outer precinct. In the distance I could see the man sat on some steps above the crowd. It looked as though his followers from Galilee were sat at the bottom of the steps nearby, and I could see the bright robes of some our leaders a few steps up trying to keep away from them and talk with Jesus.

Slowly I made my way forward until I was near the front of the crowd. I asked a neighbour what had been going on. She replied: 'All the leaders have been taking turns asking difficult questions, I'm not sure what they were about but Jesus seems content enough and the leaders are getting more and more annoyed.' Someone else overhearing added: 'And he's told some great stories, and somehow they angered the leaders more.'

Then I heard the question. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

You could have heard a pin drop, the crowd became completely silent, all intently listening for the answer. Our leaders were always telling us about the laws we should follow, to do this to do that, but which was the greatest, the most important to our God.

I strained my ears listening for the reply: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and

first commandment.'

Half the crowd seemed to join in as he said it, the words formed on my lips with him, the words of the Shema. We say it every week in worship, we all say the words together, say them staring at our feet or looking up to heaven, but we always say them. These over familiar words, a phrase we were so used to, given new power in reply to the law.

But Jesus had not finished, we were all dumbstruck by his first reply, but there was more. He continued 'And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

All of the thousands of rules the leaders told us to follow summed up in two sentences. Love God, love each other. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

It felt as if the crowd were all lifted up at the same time, as if a great burden had been taken off them. The weight of all the pharisee's laws distilled into two sentences, a way to live obeying God rather than rules to obey. Following God's way rather than the pharisee's commands.

The crowd were all smiling, hugging friends, talking to strangers, repeating the words of the Shema in praise to God. The leaders were the only ones with frowns, they asked another question but the crowd ignored them.

The happiest people were the disciples, these ruffians from Galilee were grinning from ear to ear looking at the crowd. One of the reached out and grabbed my hand and shook it, it was the one I had met the day before. He had that same gentle smile of contentment, and his eyes stared deep into me.

'Thank you brother for your donkeys. Shalom, God's peace be with you.'

This man I had taken for a thief, a vagrant from Galilee, was blessing me with God's peace and I truly felt at peace with God. Surely this Jesus, this prophet from Nazareth, is of God, and is to be followed.

I returned home to share this news with my family, with my neighbours, singing as I went: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

Shalom, may God's peace be with you. **Amen**