

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Palm Sunday Sermon**  
**St James' Church, Wichita**  
**5 April 2009**

---

[Palm Sunday reading; then Passion Narrative of St Mark's Gospel]

May I speak in the name of the One God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of Life.

Dear people of St James' Church, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is a great joy to be with you this morning. Thank you for your kind invitation.

As I stand here before you, I am very aware that first impressions count – and that how we make an entrance, speaks volumes.

I hope I am making a better impression than the heads of automobile industries did recently.

I am sure that you remember the outcry when, heading to Washington to plead that they were facing bankruptcy, they travelled in private jets!

On Palm Sunday, we remember Jesus making his entrance into Jerusalem, on the back of a donkey.

What was the message that he was trying to convey? What was the message that others heard?

Well, the Romans probably saw a peaceful, joyful, demonstration – so they were not too bothered – it was something they could ignore.

But Jesus was not there just to give people a good time and otherwise to be ignored.

For Jews with any insight into their own tradition, there was quite a different message.

Custom had it that only the king could enter the city without dismounting.

But what sort of king was he?

Some of the Jews – the Zealots, the would-be freedom fighters – would have been disappointed that he did not enter the city on a war-horse, a Messiah come to overthrow the Romans and re-establish a powerful kingdom, like that of David or Solomon.

Yet that was not the message Jesus on his donkey had in mind.

The religious leaders perhaps saw a different message of kingship – a challenge to the kingship of God.

It was this that led, a few days later, to him being brought before the High Priest, who asked him 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?'

Jesus replied 'I am.'

Blasphemy, they said, and decided he deserved of death.

In a sense they had got the message.

They were right that Jesus was calling himself the Messiah, the Christ, God's anointed one.

But they had also completely misunderstood.

They could not grasp that Jesus might indeed be the Messiah – because they could not grasp the nature of Messiah-ship that Jesus proclaimed.

Throughout his ministry, in his donkey riding, before the Sanhedrin, and on the cross, Jesus has a clear message about the nature of the kingdom of God, and of God's Messiah.

It is a message that overturns the assumptions of the world, of those who look only at superficial meanings.

Jesus challenges us to engage with the ultimate truth of what life is about, of what matters, and what has true value and worth.

This is the challenge that is with us today – especially as we look at the global economic crisis.

At best, it is bringing terrible uncertainty about the future – at worst, it is leaving people without livelihoods, without income, even without hope.

I am sure Wichita is not immune from the shock-waves of the credit crunch.

But what for me is more worrying, is that the greatest and longest-lasting impact is likely to be upon the poorest nations of the world – who are those least responsible for the crisis.

For example, studies suggest that the 390 million poorest Africans will see their income drop by around 20% - a far worse average than in the developed world – and of course, from a far lower starting point.

One consequence of less money is less food. It is estimated that an additional 400,000 children globally will die of malnutrition this year because of the credit crunch – that is, 1095 more child deaths every day. Countless more will suffer irreversible cognitive damage through serious malnutrition – they will be permanently harmed.

We know that the credit crunch is forcing a comprehensive rethink of our economic systems.

But if we only try to solve the symptoms, and not the underlying problems; and if we only address the developed world, and fail to tackle structural global injustices; we will have missed the point – and we will simply see history repeat itself down the line.

Our rethink requires us to look again at the king on the donkey.

What is his message about true values?

Well, perhaps we should start with what it is not!

A millenium before, the prophet Samuel had warned the ancient Hebrew people of what would happen if they went ahead and insisted on a king.

Let me paraphrase in modern language, what we read in 1 Samuel 8:

A king will take your children for his armed forces and government service and to work for him in whatever way he wants. He will tax you, take the best of your production, and give you inadequate recompense, and you, the population at large, will bear the cost while he and his entourage live well at your expense!

Three thousand years on, this is still the way of the world.

Those who are most powerful, politically and economically, enjoy the best to a disproportionate degree, and the poorest pay.

The way of the world says:

- Might is right
- Bigger is better
- Greed is good
- Money talks
- Your value as a human being is your worth in dollars.

And no doubt you could add more to the list.

The king on the donkey has something else to say:

- The first shall be last, and the last shall be first
- I came not to be served, but to serve
- My kingdom brings good news to the poor, liberty to the oppressed, sight to the blind, freedom to those who are trapped
- Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, care for the sick, and you are serving God – you are doing work of eternal value.

And though we try to do such things because we have dared to listen to the message of the king on the donkey, and because we know the Spirit of God will equip and empower us to live in these counter-cultural ways, it is not only Christians who understand what really matters.

We must align ourselves with others who, by God's grace, have got the message.

Many people have re-echoed the sentiment first voiced, variously, by Mahatma Gandhi and Winston Churchill – that a country's greatness, its level of civilisation, is measured in the way it treats its weakest members – the elderly, the sick, the incapacitated, the child.

Today we are increasingly a global village – and therefore we can say that the measure of humanity's greatness, of humanity's claim to be civilised, is how we, as the human race, treat our own weakest, poorest, most marginalised, least able.

What level of greatness, of civilisation, was shown by the so-called leaders of the world at last week's G20 summit?

*[add further comment after summit, by email, to Tony / Dixie / Revd Kate Moorhead]*

But what of us? What can we do?

Well, the public voice, when it speaks clearly, when it speaks in unison – or at least in harmony with one another – actually has a remarkable power to influence politicians. We should be encouraged to speak out.

And we can also, as is often said, ‘think global, act local’.

In whatever sphere of influence we have, whether it be in our place of work, the parent-teacher association, our sports club, our community associations – we can also try to ensure that the values that really matter are the ones that count.

Of course, it is not always easy to know what those are – and inevitably, if we are not vigilant, we fall back into the old habits of rewarding those who already have, instead of taking care of those who have not.

The way forward is to make sure that the king on the donkey is the king of our lives – that day by day by day we let him mould us and guide us, through prayer, through reading and reflecting on the scriptures.

We must let him feed us Sunday by Sunday in the Eucharist – at the table where everyone, not only the rich and powerful, are welcome to eat with the king.

And we must follow his example.

He knew what sort of Messiah he was to be, and yet in Gethsemane, he wrestled in prayer to ensure that, in the heat of the crisis, in this ultimate test, he could interpret what his calling meant, and stay true to it.

So we too must ‘watch and pray’ as he did.

Therefore, as Holy Week begins, and with the promise of Easter before us, let us all be those who watch and pray – that we may not be found weak in preferring the standards of the world; but be strengthened to live as citizens of the king who comes on a donkey.

Amen.