

## SCRIPTURE

**Luke 19:28–40**

## MESSAGE

[Rough draft]

This morning's scene opens with crowds gone wild – crazy in love with Jesus. Throwing their coats on the ground for the donkey to walk on.

Not like today where we have plenty of jackets – they would have only one, and no running water or washing machine to clean the mud and poop off it afterwards.

Here's my trouble with the story – it's not what happened this weekend – it's what happened the next weekend.

They turned on him. Many of those who were throwing their cloaks on the ground soon found themselves crying out for his blood. What happened? How could they change so drastically?

This window of the sower gives us some thoughts.

No roots. No foundation – they aren't able to stand against the winds of public opinion or the urges of their own desires.

So these folks with no roots turned on Jesus – and quite quickly. And it was no small change. They didn't move from kind of liking him to not being sure. They went from 'Save us son of David' to 'kill that healing prophet of love and instead set that murderer free to live among us.'

Is the step from welcoming God to killing God really that short?

Kyoungsoo and I were debating this in the car yesterday. She quoted Paul's letter to the Corinthians that if the rulers of the world really understood who Jesus was they wouldn't have killed him.

I think this is true of some people. Some people act out of ignorance, and when their error is pointed out they want to correct it. They want to do what is right, to live a better way.

I think there is more to it than that. Some people just want to watch the world burn.

The thief comes only to kill and destroy, and each one of us can fall prey to his influence.

So the big question that Palm Sunday raises for me is how can we receive Jesus in such a way that we don't turn around and call for his death at the first opportunity?

And before you tune me out and think that you would never call for Jesus' death so this sermon doesn't apply, let me remind you of something Jesus said. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer. You don't have to wield a knife.

Denying someone's existence is the same thing. If I were to say 'I have no sister! She is dead to me!' then I have effectively killed her. She's a ghost.

Now this starts to get a little close to the mark. Do we deny Jesus? Do we come to church on a Sunday to wave palm branches but then through the week we ghost Jesus – act as though he does not exist, effectively removing him from our lives? Do we exalt Barrabas? Invite evil to dwell among us instead of the son of God?

Tough questions.

Here's another way in which we kill Jesus – bad theology. It's quite common to encounter folks who have a very low Christology – which basically means that they have an impoverished view of who Jesus was and is.

I often hear phrases along the lines of 'Jesus was a good moral teacher, his life is an example to us. He showed us the way to live.' All of these statements are true, but the unspoken conclusion is that this is all he was. When we reduce Jesus to merely being a teacher or moral exemplar, then he is just a man. That's all.

If Jesus was just a man, then the incarnation and resurrection count for nothing. When Jesus declared that he was in God, and God in him, and that if we remained in him then we too would be in God and God in us – none of that has any meaning if Jesus were just a man.

Likewise with Jesus parting words 'I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.' What a ridiculous thing for a man to say. My comfort and strength comes from the fact that God will be with me no matter what – not some long dead teacher.

When we diminish Jesus is this way – we kill him. He is effectively dead, as far as we are concerned.

The same thing happens with God. For many people God is not a being that thinks and wills and creates, but some kind of vague life force – somehow the sum of all things and yet nothing.

God is love, they say, and while it is true that God is love, if that is all God is then we are really left with nothing. If we strip away the person of God – the conscious awareness and intention – then the statement God is love is completely devoid of meaning.

Unfortunately this concept of God is quite widespread – even within our own denomination. This deception is deadly. Here is why.

The God as life-force can make no demands. This is why people subscribe to this view. If God is vague love then I can do whatever I like as long as I call it love, whatever love means to me.

There is no expectation, no responsibility, no accountability. This kind of God is infinitely permissive – each of us gets to make up our own right and wrong. As the only sentient beings in the universe we are our own gods. We decide. Everything.

This gets under my skin – deeply. Especially when I hear ministers espousing this nonsense – this poison.

Here's why. It's not that we need expectation, responsibility, and accountability so that we can control the masses or some other oppressive purpose as many would have us believe.

It's that if we have no demands placed upon us we will never grow. People who preach weak theology, this God is love crap, actually rob others of their opportunity to grow into the image of God.

Ken mentioned the decline of the church this morning – I believe that one of the key reasons for this is the strangely diminished and impoverished view of God that is preached in many liberal congregations these days.

Human beings don't grow and develop in a soft cloud of hazy love. Our best is always produced through challenge and tough circumstances. It's hunger that makes us get up and find food – not satisfaction. Discomfort and discontent are what motivate us to make things better.

God realized this – once Adam and Eve ate the fruit God said 'You've got a brain, you're making your own decisions now – so get out there in the world and learn something – make something of yourselves. Experience hardships and pain and learn and grow from them. Learn what sacrifice is and then maybe you'll learn something about what love is.

Soft, mushy, feel-good theology cannot do this for us. If our God has no expectations for us, then why would we have expectations for ourselves? We are left living in a subjective, relativistic nightmare in which nothing is real – there is no intrinsic meaning; nor can there be. Other than hedonistic pleasures, why would we even try to stay alive? What's the point?

We need a higher view of God if we are to have any hope at all. God is not a feel-good love-force. God is a being with intent and expectations. God has standards and purpose.

So before we reject the judgement of God as some kind of archaic method of controlling the masses we should stop and consider that the presence of judgment means that some things are better than others.

Some things are worth striving for, working for, even dying for. Judgement gives purpose to an otherwise meaningless miserable existence. My judgement and your judgement won't really do that – too many competing kingdoms – but God's judgement sets a standard of being for us.

Jesus as the Son of God exemplifies and demonstrates that standard. The Holy Spirit empowers and encourages us to pursue and live into that standard. And the end result of all of this is transformation. It is new life – a regenerated life.

As Ken reminded us this morning, our vision is to be a shining witness in Norfolk to the transforming love of Jesus. We can't do that if we haven't been transformed.

The key to that transformation is how we receive Jesus as he humbly approaches us on a donkey. Do receive him as a son of David – or as the son of God? A wrong understanding will lead us to receive Jesus in a superficial way – just like the crowds. Good for a time, but easily sacrificed if that seems expedient.

This same thinking applies to God as well. Only with a high view of God – a developed understanding of God as a being with purpose, plans, and expectations – a God who judges - can we ever hope to be transformed – to be called from our present condition into meaning and glory.

Only then will we be ready to be witnesses in Norfolk to the transforming love of Jesus.

Amen.