

## Jesus in the Perfect Storm

*Zechariah 9.9-17; Luke 19.28-48*

A sermon for Palm Sunday, April 17, 2011

In the University Chapel of St Salvator, St Andrews

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The crowd went wild as they got nearer. This was the moment they'd been waiting for. All the old songs came flooding back, and they were singing, chanting, cheering and laughing. At last their dreams were going to come true.

But in the middle of it all their leader wasn't singing. He was in tears. Yes, their dreams were indeed coming true. But not in the way they were imagining.

He was not the king they expected. Not like the monarchs of old, who sat on their jewelled and ivory thrones, dispensing their justice and wisdom. Nor was he the great warrior-king some had wanted. He didn't raise an army and ride to battle at its head. He was riding on a donkey. And he was weeping, weeping for the dream that had to die, weeping for the sword that would pierce his supporters to the soul. Weeping for the kingdom that wasn't coming as well as the kingdom that was.

What was it all about? What did Jesus think he was doing?

On this day, Palm Sunday, Jesus was riding into the middle of the perfect storm.

You remember the story of the famous 'perfect storm'. It was late October 1991. A New England fishing boat by the name of *Andrea Gail* had sailed five hundred miles out into the Atlantic. But the weather was changing rapidly. A cold front moving along the U.S.-Canada border sent a strong disturbance through New England, while at the same time a large high-pressure system was building over the Maritime provinces of south-eastern Canada. This intensified the incoming low-pressure system, producing what locals called 'The Halloween Nor'easter'. These circumstances alone could have created a strong storm, but then, like throwing petrol on a fire, a hurricane coming in from the Atlantic brought incalculable tropical energy to the mix. The forces of nature converged on the helpless *Andrea Gail* from the west, the north and the south-east. Ferocious winds and huge waves reduced the boat to

matchwood. Only light debris was ever found. There had, of course, been earlier 'perfect storms', but this was the one made famous by a book and a movie which took that phrase as their title.

The first two elements of Jesus' perfect storm are comparatively easy to describe; the third less so but all-important if we are to understand both the original meaning of Palm Sunday and the meanings that it might have for us in our own pilgrimage to the foot of the cross in this holiest of weeks.

To begin with, the storm sweeping in from the West. The new social, political and (not least) military reality of the day. The new superpower. Rome.

Rome had been steadily increasing in power and prominence over the previous centuries. Until thirty years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, Rome had been a republic. But with Julius Caesar all that changed. His ambition, and then his assassination, threw Rome into a long, bloody civil war, from which Caesar's adopted son, Octavian, emerged as the winner. He took the title 'Augustus', which meant 'majestic' or 'worthy of honour'. He declared that his adopted father, Julius, had become divine; this meant that he, Augustus Octavian Caesar, was now officially 'son of god', 'son of the divine Julius'. The word went round the world which Rome was quickly conquering: Good news! We have an emperor! The Son of God has become King of the world!

After Augustus' death, he too was divinized, and his successor, Tiberius, took the same titles. I have on my desk a coin from the reign of Tiberius (there are plenty of them, readily available). On the front, around Tiberius's portrait, it says 'Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus'. On the back is Tiberius portrayed, and described, as 'chief priest.' It was a coin like this that they showed to Jesus of Nazareth, not long after he had ridden into Jerusalem, when they asked him whether or not they should pay tribute to Caesar. 'Son of God'; 'high priest'? He was at the eye of the storm.

Why was Rome interested in the Middle East? For surprisingly familiar reasons. Rome needed the Middle East like today's western powers need it – for raw material. Today it's oil; then it was grain. Rome itself was grossly overpopulated; grain shipments from Egypt were vital. In a region just as unstable in the first century as today, the job of a Roman governor was to administer justice, collect the taxes, and keep the peace – and particularly to suppress

unrest. That was the gale: the first element in the perfect storm at whose centre Jesus of Nazareth found himself.

The second great element in Jesus' perfect storm, the overheated high-pressure system, is the story of Israel as Jesus' contemporaries perceived it and believed themselves to be living in it. As far back as we can trace their ancient scriptures the Jewish people had believed that their story was going somewhere, that it had a goal in mind. Despite many setbacks and disappointments, their god would make sure they reached the goal at last.

The stories they told were not simply stories of small beginnings, sad times at present, and glorious days to come. They were more specific, more complex, dense with detail and heavy with hope. Their theme came to full flower in the story of the Exodus, when Moses had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea and through the desert to their Promised Land. The Jews lived on the hope that it would happen again. The tyrants would do their worst, and God would deliver them. Understand the Exodus, and you understand a good deal about Judaism. And about Jesus. Jesus chose Passover, the great national Exodus-festival, to make his crucial move. The long story of Israel must finally confront the long story of Rome. This is no time to be out on the sea in an open boat. Or riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

The western wind meets the high-pressure system. What about the hurricane?

The Jewish story always contained one highly unpredictable element, namely God himself. God remained free and sovereign. Again and again in the past the way Israel had told its own story was different from the way God was planning things. Jesus believed that was happening again now. God had promised to come back, to return to his people in power and glory, to establish his kingdom on earth as in heaven. The Jewish people always hoped that this would simply underwrite their national aspirations; he was, after all, their God. But the prophets, up to and including John the Baptist, had always warned that God's coming in power and in person would be entirely on his own terms, with his own purpose – and that his own people would be as much under judgment as anyone if their aspirations didn't coincide with God's.

Jesus believed – we heard it in our second reading – that as he came to Jerusalem he was embodying, incarnating, the return of Israel's God to his

people, in power and glory. But it was a different kind of power, a different kind of glory.

Remember that moment in 'Jesus Christ Superstar' – produced when Tim Rice was still writing shrewd, sharp lyrics and Andrew Lloyd Webber was still writing interesting music – when Jesus is approaching Jerusalem and Simon the Zealot urges him to mount a proper revolution. 'You'll get the power and the glory,' he says, 'for ever and ever and ever.' Jesus turns and sings those haunting lines: 'Neither you, Simon, nor the fifty thousand; nor the Romans, nor the Jews; nor Judas, nor the Twelve, nor the priests, nor the scribes, nor doomed Jerusalem itself – *understand what power is! Understand what glory is! Understand at all.*' And then he continues with the warning we heard in our second lesson, the warning of what was going to happen to Jerusalem, because, as he says, 'You didn't recognise the time of your visitation by God'.

This is the moment, and you were looking the other way. Your dreams of national liberation, leading you into head-on confrontation with Rome, were not God's dreams. God called Israel so that through Israel he might redeem the world; but Israel itself needs redeeming as well. Hence God comes to Israel riding on a donkey, in fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy of the coming peaceful kingdom, announcing judgment on the system and the city that have turned their vocation in upon themselves, and going off to take the weight of the world's evil and hostility onto himself, so that by dying under it he might exhaust its power.

All his public career Jesus had been embodying the rescuing, redeeming love of Israel's God, and Israel's own capital city and leaders couldn't see it. The divine hurricane sweeps in from the ocean, and to accomplish its purpose it must meet, head on, the cruel western wind of pagan empire and the high-octane high-pressure system of national aspiration. Jesus seizes the moment, the Passover-moment, the Exodus-moment, not least because these, too, speak of the sovereign freedom and presence of God as much over his rebellious and incomprehending people as over the tyranny of Egypt. And as we watch the events of Holy Week unfold, and as we share in them and make our own pilgrimage to the foot of the cross, we cannot simply look on and register them as an odd quirk of history. This was the perfect storm. This was where the hurricane of divine love met the cold might of empire and the overheated aspiration of Israel. Only when we pause and reflect on that combination do we begin to understand the meaning of Jesus' death. Only then may we understand how it is that the true Son of God, the true High Priest, has indeed become King of the world.

And perhaps only then can we begin to make sense of all the other things that will be on our minds this week, the things we carry with us as we make our own pilgrimage to the foot of the cross. Out of many possibilities I mention only two.

First, there is the obvious and deeply worrying direct parallel with today's version of western imperialism and local middle-eastern aspirations. I find it almost impossible to believe that, with the Iraq adventure hardly over and the Afghanistan adventure still rumbling on and claiming lives and money, we have set sail so cheerfully, and with minimal reflection, on yet another open-ended military excursion. The two first elements of the perfect storm are fully in place: it is embarrassingly obvious that the main driver for the action has little to do with justice or mercy – or why have we not intervened in lots of other places, such as Zimbabwe? – and a huge amount to do with revenge on the one hand and oil on the other. And who knows, within the turbulent criss-crossing agendas of the many peoples of the Middle East, where the law of unintended consequences might take us this time?

The truly unknown factor, of course, is what God intends to do in and through it all. Western politicians would no doubt scoff at such a question, though in Tripoli and Benghazi, as in Jerusalem, Damascus and elsewhere, that question is central, and people think they know the answer. But I suggest that for us this week part of our pilgrimage ought to be a pilgrimage of prayer, that as we follow Jesus on the way to the cross so we will hold the Middle East and North Africa in prayer, not least all those who are suffering and dying through no fault of their own, particularly the already embattled Christian communities in those regions. We should pray that somehow wisdom will triumph over folly, and justice over selfish brutality. Maybe, just maybe, a new element will emerge to bring fresh possibilities for lasting peace and justice. Let us claim, in prayer, the power of the victory of Jesus to prevent a new perfect storm erupting in the Middle East and bringing chaos and misery to millions.

But, second, a much more personal note for this Holy Week. Take up your cross, said Jesus, and follow me; and as we do so we often find ourselves caught up in our own micro-versions of the perfect storm. We are subject, first, to all the usual pressures of the wider world, of contemporary culture. If you want to get on in the world, you've got to play the game this way. Many of you will find, soon enough, that the price of 'getting on' in the world's sense may be your own integrity; we have seen in the last two years embarrassing collapses of integrity in Parliament, in the banking system, in journalism, and

there may be more to come. But the world will go on insisting that you should play by its rules, rules which are increasingly hard-nosed as secular pragmatism sweeps old-fashioned moralism out of the way. That is one element in our own perfect storms.

The second is, of course, that you yourself have your own aspirations and expectations. You want to get a degree; you want to get a job; you want to earn some money; perhaps you want to get married. Fine. Somehow you are going to have to navigate the choppy and increasingly stormy waters where all those normal and natural things meet the sharp, often heartless, wind of contemporary culture. How do we prevent our own aspirations being merely self-centred? As we walk through Holy Week we should be aware of, and should be praying for, the third element: where is God in all of this?

Woe betide us if we merely invoke God to back up our own ambitions and aspirations. Woe betide us doubly if we imagine we can find God simply in the spirit of the age. These are the two weather-systems with which we live all the time, but we are called this week to open ourselves to the third one. Again and again, if we try to follow Jesus in faith and hope and love on his journey to the cross, we will find that the hurricane of love which we tremblingly call God will sweep in from a fresh angle, fulfilling our dreams by first shattering them, bringing something new out of the dangerous combination of personal hopes and cultural pressures. Do not be surprised if in this process there are moments when it feels as though you are being sucked down to the depths, five hundred miles from shore amidst hundred-foot waves, weeping for the dream that has had to die, for the kingdom that isn't coming the way you wanted. That's what it's like when you are caught up in Jesus' perfect storm.

But be sure, when that happens, when you say with the disciples on the road to Emmaus 'We had hoped... but now it's all gone wrong', that you are on the verge of hearing the fresh word, the word that comes when the storm is stilled and in the new great calm we see a way forward we had never imagined. 'Foolish ones,' said Jesus, 'and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had spoken! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and so enter into his glory?'

Who knows what might happen if one of you – ten of you – fifty of you – were to go through this Holy Week praying humbly for the powerful fresh wind of God to blow into that combination of cultural pressure and personal aspiration, so that you might share in the sufferings of the Messiah and come through into the new life he longs to give you? Who knows what God's power and God's

glory will look like when they steal upon tomorrow's world from an unexpected angle? If the Son of God is now King of the world, what will that kingdom look like in this next generation?