Inclusive royalty

I once got a letter from a disgruntled person after holding an animal service in church. She wrote saying that Jesus drove animals out of the Temple, and therefore, it clearly was against his will that we should have them in church and I should know better. My reply was fairly curt, suggesting that she would do well to have another look at the passage.

Other people sometimes think that Jesus was somehow condemning any financial transaction in a holy place, and that therefore fund-raising events or buying tickets for a concert in church are clearly wrong.

The reality of Jesus' anger in the Temple was very different. The Temple was the centre of the Jewish faith. And Passover was the time when people flocked from all over Palestine to Jerusalem to sacrifice in the Temple – it was the peak of the religious year, like Christmas and Easter rolled into one. The population of just under a million in Jerusalem swelled to approximately 2 million for these few days.

Many were poor, and they brought with them a dove to sacrifice, which, as they understood it, would restore their own peace with God. But the dove had by law to be a dove 'without blemish or defect'. And the only way you could regulate that was to have officials checking the quality of the doves. And in practice, what most of them did was find a defect with just about any dove bought outside the temple grounds; so those who had come to worship had to buy a dove from among those which were conveniently being sold by Temple officials within the Temple courts. Only, the going rate for the doves purchased inside was sometimes up to 10x the cost of a dove purchased outside. Not all the traders were dishonest, but many were. And then of course, you could only purchase a Temple dove with the local currency, so you had to change money from your regional currency to the local one, and the exchange rate was fixed and exorbitant. The whole thing was a business savvy and unscrupulous system which meant that the Temple coffers were never empty. But worse than that. It didn't just make it hard for people to fulfil the religious duties they longed to fulfil, but it kept some people out altogether.

Some of those coming to Passover were only subsistence farmers and they just couldn't afford the extra expenses. So, they were kept in the outer courts, and it was believed that God's presence was more powerful, the closer you got to the centre of the Temple. But they were kept away. And that made Jesus angry to the point of getting physical. And let's remember, he was in his early 30s, a carpenter used to manual labour, and so probably even physically a force to be reckoned with.

Jesus was passionate about including people. He was, I think, the greatest includer of all time.

At his birth, the first witnesses were the shepherds, banned by virtue of the unclean nature of their job from entering the Temple. The first person to witness the resurrection was a woman, and as such, someone who could never give testimony in court. Jesus healed the servant of a Roman army officer – again, outside the borders of the Jewish people. Each of

those facts was shockingly inclusive to the understanding of the time. Not to mention the quite offensive nature of the parable of the Good Samaritan (suggesting that some ghastly Samaritan would behave better than a priest !!) and the interesting fact that the man who carried Jesus' cross when it became too much for him was a black man, from Cyrene in northern Africa.

We have this anxiety that nailing our colours to the Jesus mast, if I can put it that way, is somehow exclusive. After all, what about those of other faiths ? But Jesus knew that some people would be in relationship with him without knowing his name. Look at the parable of the sheep and the goats: Jesus says "thank you that you fed me when I was hungry, cared for me when I was sick". And these people will reply "we don't remember ever doing that for you. We don't remember ever meeting you." Jesus replies in effect, you may not have known my name. But in a way, you really knew me.

Jesus stood out against the exclusivity of his culture probably more than any campaigner for inclusivity ever has. Incidentally, a passion for inclusivity is not the same as 'anything goes'. If any of you are regularly committing GBH, I am unlikely to ask you to lead intercessions.

Let's go back to the first part of the events of Palm Sunday.

A light-hearted aside – Sometimes the same words can be used correctly to mean two completely different things to two different people.

I knew an Austrian man who produced his most courteous, grammatically-correct English, when asked by a London waitress if he wanted anything more to eat. "No thank you," he said, patting his stomach contentedly "I am fed up". What he meant and what she heard were rather different.

Palm Sunday was the day Jesus was proclaimed by the crowds as being royalty. For centuries, they had believed that the Messianic **king** would enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The prophets had insisted that the king sent by God would be from the line of David, and now the crowds shouted 'Hosanna, to the Son of David !'.   And palm branches had been used in the past to greet a conquering king riding back into Jerusalem after a great victory.

Yes, many in the crowds shouting and cheering that day were clearly hoping for a kingship that was going to be more hands on and military, but Jesus knew the real meaning of those words. That he was indeed King, but ruling in a different way. But what he did not do was stop and say 'you're getting it wrong'. Jesus warmly accepted and welcomed those words and those symbols as he rode in.

For us, the idea of inclusive royalty may sound very strange. But let's be quite clear: Recognising Jesus as THE way, as THE one we will follow, is not a decision for exclusivity. It is to nail our colours to the mast of the most inclusive leader of all time. As he and now we approach the extraordinary events of the week leading up to Easter, let's know that in honouring Jesus as THE way, we are following the one who longs to embrace all.