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# So it Comes to This

Matthew 21: 1-11

A Sermon preached at Duke Chapel on April 2, 2023 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

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I want you to imagine two great arches, one inside the other. The inner arch I'll call 'The story we usually tell.' The outer, larger, arch I'm going to call 'The more encompassing story.'

The story we usually tell goes like this. There's a man and a woman in a garden. They eat an apple – and everything goes wrong from then on, like earthquakes, wars, and Duke not getting through the first week of the NCAA this year. God tries to fix it with Noah and frankly a bunch of complete animals. Then God gets serious with Abraham and Moses and a covenant. And to be fair, that lasts 39 books of the Bible, but somehow things remain sub-optimal. So God sends Jesus, God from God, light from light, and Jesus dies on the cross and all the bad stuff goes away. Which means when we die, we'll be fine. God's got this. That's the inner arch.

Here's the outer arch – the more encompassing story. It goes like this. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are totally absorbed by the most wondrous things we can imagine: utter adoration, complete belonging, sheer joy. And that perfect pattern of love for one another becomes effervescent: the Trinity finds itself wanting an other to share this joy, an other for the Trinity to be gloriously *with*. So the Trinity's shaped to be with that other. And we call this the incarnation, which is God being so shaped as to be in relationship beyond the Trinity. And that triggers creation, because there needs to be a theatre in which God, the incarnate one, whom we call Jesus, meets that other. And because Jesus needs to belong, there's an Israel out of which Jesus comes, as much as Jesus comes from God. And because creation is finite, and nothing in it lasts forever (whereas God does last forever), God prepares a time when the being-with-us that God embodies in Jesus will ultimately become a forever thing, and we and everyone else and the whole creation will be taken up into forever to be with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which is what we call glory, or heaven. That's the outer arch.

Now as soon as I describe the more encompassing story you can begin to see what's wrong with the inner arch, the story we usually tell. I'm not talking right now about the history and the science, how the act of creation worked and whether there really was a fall. I'm looking at two main problems. The first is, if Jesus becoming incarnate is the most important thing about God, let alone the most important thing about humankind, isn't it a bit of a problem that it only comes about by an unfortunate accident – that's to say the fall, which was never supposed to happen? And while we're about it, here's the second problem: if Jesus came to fix all the things wrong with the world, earthquakes, wars and Duke's difficulties from the free-throw line, how come those problems seem as much with us as ever 2000 years after he came?

I want to suggest that both of these problems come down to the same problem, and it's the main thing that distinguishes the story we tell from the more encompassing story. The inner arch is *a story all about us*. It only gets interesting when we come on the scene; what matters is *our* problem with the ways the world isn't perfect; Jesus comes like a plumber we summoned to fix a pipe; and now we want our money back, because the pipe's still leaking. Now this is what I want you to notice. When we turn to the outer arch, the more encompassing story we find *a story that's all about God*. It begins with God having a great time. It ends with God having a great time. It still has Jesus in the center of the story: but Jesus doesn't come to fix our problem. Jesus comes because that's in what we might call the DNA of God – the effervescence of the Trinity that spills over into incarnation and creation. This is the key point: *there was always going to be a Jesus*, because *there always has been a Jesus*, from before the foundation of the world. Jesus doesn't come like a plumber to fix our pipe: that would be to define God and the whole story by a deficit. Jesus comes *because God wants to be with us*. That's to build the story around an asset – the greatest asset of all: God's effervescent glory.

Now I want to focus these two stories down on today, Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday's special because it's the day all the main characters in the narrative assemble in Jerusalem for the denouement of the gospel story. 'So it comes to this,' as they say in the movies, just before the final scene when everyone's present. There's the people who want Jesus disposed of – the Sadducees, scribes, elders, Pharisees. There's the people who passionately support Jesus – the twelve disciples, the women disciples, the people he's healed. There's the ones in between – the crowd. And there's the Romans and Herodians, who want just to keep it quiet. But because, as we've just said, this is fundamentally a story about God, we should say that the Father and the Holy Spirit are there too. Jesus is in the middle of the story – he's the one that links all the other characters together. Almost everyone maintains they're powerless – the Sanhedrin think it's up to the Romans, the Romans think it's up to the crowd, the disciples

think some combination of all three are going to destroy them, the crowd turns nasty: the story's telling us that when it comes to Jesus' death, everyone's to blame, but everyone blames someone else.

Now in the small-arch story we usually tell, Jesus goes to Jerusalem to die. That's because Christianity's created a host of theories by which it explains how the cross takes away sin or destroys death or defeats evil. There's two problems with these theories. First, as we've seen, they don't work: evil, sin and death seem to be very much still with us. Second, they distort the picture of God that Jesus gives us. Jesus shows us a God who created the world to be with us and will go to any lengths to be with us and will ultimately be with us always. These theories turn that God into either a God subject to some external law of justice or honor or, even worse, a God committed to exacting horrific punishment: in other words, some kind of a monster.

Think of it this way: Jesus has gone round Galilee showing us a God who is with us in every kind of extremity: sickness, ostracism, oppression, death. Now he comes to Jerusalem to be with us in the heat of political and social turmoil. And what happens is that Jerusalem has an allergic reaction to Jesus. It regurgitates him and tramples him down. When the utter embodiment of God's desire to be with us is present in the midst of human turmoil, that turmoil turns on him. You don't need any theory for this: you just need the gospel accounts we have. Jesus doesn't go to Jerusalem to *die*: but put him *in* Jerusalem, and the outcome is almost inevitable.

Let me tell you a story. The 2022 movie *The Swimmers* portrays two teenage sisters, Yusra and Sarah, who are living in Damascus during the Syrian civil war. They're serious swimmers, but see no future for themselves in Syria, where they're bound to be killed or assaulted or worse. So they escape to Turkey. Through a mixture of bribes, risks and luck, they get as far as a large dinghy to take them across the Aegean Sea to Europe. Here things go badly wrong. The boat has a couple of dozen people on it, which is evidently way too many. The owner hops off on departure, leaving the refugees to fend for themselves. They have no compass or navigation equipment, and the motor stalls after a few hours. It's night, and the waves are high, and everyone's panic-stricken and terrified. The boat begins to sink, and all the luggage has to be thrown overboard. One passenger gets a signal on his phone and calls the coastguard – only for a voice to say, 'It's not our policy to rescue stranded boats.' The boat's too heavy and it's leaking water and it's inevitable they're all going to drown. Sarah realizes there's only one thing to do. She must jump in the water. She says goodbye to all the swimming medals she's wearing around her neck, and tosses them into the deep. Then she jumps in after them. The other passengers are bewildered and amazed. After a while her sister Yusra jumps in too. The boat lightens. After what seems like forever, the passengers spy land. It's a Greek island. It's Europe. Yusra swims for the shore and drags the boat in.

The story became famous because the sisters made their way to Germany. Yusra found a swim coach, and with Sarah's encouragement she ended up representing the tiny but courageous refugee team at the 2016 Rio Olympics. She's now an international ambassador for refugees. What I want to focus on is the moment Sarah and Yusra jump into the sea. They don't get on the boat intending to lay down their lives. They don't make the journey from Damascus expecting their lives and the lives of those around them to be in such deep danger. But they're swimmers. For them, when the deepest crisis arises, their most profound act of solidarity is to jump off the boat. They shuffle off their signs of glory – their medals – and dive into the abyss. They save two dozen lives. But fundamentally this isn't something they're doing *for* others – they're doing it *with* others: they're saying 'We'll do what we can do while you do what you can do.'

If we go back to Jesus in Jerusalem, like Sarah and Yusra, he's not looking to die a martyr's death. He's seeking to be in solidarity with us till the very end. But just as Yusra and Sarah are swimmers, Jesus is part of the Trinity. He cannot be anything other than what he is. Yusra and Sarah go into the water because they can be in solidarity with the people on the boat in a way particular to them. Jesus goes to the cross because he believes facing death is the ultimate way to show solidarity with us. It's not that Sarah and Yusra had to die to save those on the boat. It's not that Jesus had to die to save us. It's that, at the defining point in their lives, they had to risk death because this was who they were: they could do no other.

I want to draw your attention to something you might not have noticed, and I hadn't noticed until recently. Three times in the New Testament we hear the phrase 'before the foundation of the world.' We find it John chapter 17, Ephesians and First Peter. In each case it means the same thing. It means God *chose to be incarnate in Jesus before there was any creation*. In fact it means that *God's intention to become incarnate in Jesus was the reason for creation*. All of which sounds fine and dandy, until you realize what *else* it means, but doesn't actually say. And that is, that Jesus couldn't have come to fix the results of the fall – because God's decision to become incarnate in Jesus was made *before there ever was a fall*. So all those theories that make out Jesus had to die to fix the problem of evil, sin and death – they miss the crucial revelation made three times in the New Testament itself that *that wasn't why Jesus came*. Jesus came to be with us in time so that we could be with him forever.

I wonder if you remember the short introduction to the footwashing scene at the Last Supper in John's gospel. Let me read you the whole sentence. 'Having loved his own who were in the world, *he loved them to the end.*' He loved them to the end. That's what happens on the cross. Jesus loves us *to the end*. The fact that Jesus didn't come to die to fix the sin problem doesn't make the cross less important. It makes it *more* important. Look at it this way. God creates the world to be with us in Christ. God prepares to bring the world finally to an end and to be with us forever. *The whole story is about being with, beginning, middle and end.* But here's the crucial moment in the story. God becomes incarnate in Jesus and dwells among us. Jesus meets us in our fragility, our folly and our fecklessness. He is Immanuel, God with us. Then suddenly he's surrounded, arrested, assaulted, condemned, crucified. Now's the moment. *If he escapes to the Father now* – if he can't hack it and because of physical pain or total humiliation or the unthinkability of death he gets swooped up by angels – *he's then detonated, demolished and discredited the whole story* – the whole reason for creation, the whole destiny of eternity together, the whole purpose of the incarnation: *if Jesus can't stay on the cross, even in the face of being abandoned by the Father, the whole initiative to be with us now and always goes up in smoke.*

The cross is the ultimate test of whether God is serious about us. And what it shows in the face of agony, desertion, abandonment and isolation, is that God is so serious about being with us that *God is willing to jeopardize being with God.* No more we doubt thee, glorious Lord of life – Jesus is so committed to being with us he endures separation from the Father. And the Father is so committed to Jesus being with us he endures not being with Jesus. And in the great mystery of being with, the Spirit remains with the Father and the Son. And two days later the Spirit reunites the Father with the Son and God with us in the resurrection.

Look at that. No fancy atonement theory that distorts God and goes against the true reason for creation and incarnation. No humancentric story that's all about Jesus fixing our problem. Just God; just God being with us; just God being with us whatever happens; just God being with us into, through and beyond Jesus' death and ours. Just God being with us forever. That's the gospel. That's the gospel like you never heard it before. That's the story that reaches its climax on Palm Sunday.

You know the hymn Be thou my vision? You ever checked out the penultimate line of that hymn? I'll sing it to you now. *Heart of my own heart, whatever befall.* That's what the cross means. That's what the incarnation means. That's what Holy Week means. From the foundation of the world. From the dying Jesus. And forever. God is singing to us, 'Heart of my own heart, whatever befall.' *Whatever befall.* I am with you always. Forever.