

LENT 2024

JOURNEY to FREEDOM

PALM SUNDAY, 24TH MARCH

READ: Exodus 20:18-21

'The people stood at a distance while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.' Exodus 20:21

In the 1990s, a friend of mine was promoted rapidly to become the finance director of a small company. His boss called him in one day and told him in no uncertain terms it was time for him to get a new car. At the time Paul was driving a Mini Metro. He had no interest in flashy cars and wanted to ensure he could give a good proportion of his income away. 'But it doesn't look right', his boss replied. 'You can't make an entrance in a Mini Metro – it simply doesn't give our clients confidence.' The upshot of the conversation was that Paul was given a BMW, paid for by the company!

How we go about 'making an entrance' signals power, status, character, intent.

As we've journeyed through the wilderness with the book of Exodus, there's no mistaking the entrance of God at Mount Sinai. Fire, thunder, earthquake, thick darkness. Everything that signals: Keep your distance. The people and priests had to consecrate themselves for two days in preparation for the coming of God (19:10, 22). This was signalling: these commandments are important. As Moses explained: *"for God has come only to test you and put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin"* (v.20).

This is very different to the entrance of Jesus on Palm Sunday which we remember today: *"Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt"* (John 12:15). He was signalling a different approach, which is beautifully picked up in the book of Hebrews (12:22): *'But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.'* It is no longer: 'Keep your distance, but everyone's welcome.'

The new covenant which Jesus sealed in His blood on the cross, confers on us a new status as sons and daughters of the gentle king, welcome in His presence, with all His angels.

But this is not to deny the spiritual reality of Mount Sinai. The 16th century mystic, St John of the Cross, wrote powerfully of the 'dark night of the soul.' By which he meant God's gentle invitation to deepen our spiritual lives, detaching us from the vibrant senses of our ego, to deepen our encounter with God by His gentle intimate presence in the 'glowing darkness.'

On this Palm Sunday, as we welcome the coming King who leads us to the cross, may we know both His call to radical welcome and radical consecration.

The Rt Revd Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster