

24th March 2024

Psalm 118.1-2, 22-29 O.T. p.514

Mark 11.1-11 N.T.p.40



The Irony of Palm Sunday

Introduction to the theme: Palm Sunday Processions

Some people love crowds, but not everyone.

On the first day of this year we were in London and, actually by accident, came across the enormous New Year's Day parade marching down Piccadilly. Everyone seemed in high spirits and was having a lot of fun with bands even from overseas. Felt like a wonderful celebration.

At the time of the Diamond Jubilee Rachel and I tried to watch the River Pageant in London. We stood on the banks of the Thames just by Parliament for a couple of hours and at the very moment the Queen's barge passed by the seemingly lovely four ladies in front of us who had been sitting on deckchairs all stood up on que together and totally blocked our view! The rascals!!

Processions are a big part of Palm Sunday and there were probably two that day. Pilate, the Roman Governor would have entered Jerusalem with the biggest procession, from the west, accompanied by hundreds of Roman Soldiers as he arrived in the city for Passover from his usual residence on the coast.

Maybe the procession of Jesus on a donkey, from the east, was much smaller as his friends and disciples welcomed him by waving their palm branches and shouting hosanna,

For myself, I sometimes sense God just as much in the quieter, more ordinary moments, than in the set piece processions and celebrations.

I especially remember that a few Christmases ago. I went to a wonderful carol concert at The Royal Albert Hall, surrounded by 5,000 other people. It was a great evening, but the truth was that Christmas I remember being more aware of the presence of God in the quiet Christmas Eve Communion service we held here at AFC with just 40 people present.

So, let's pray that over these final days of Lent leading into Easter, in all the meetings, services, concerts and activities that retell the story, there will be a moment for us when

God's love becomes real and we'll have the opportunity to give thanks and offer the worship of our hearts.

So, I wonder if you can do two things at once this morning. On your lap take your hymn book and turn to no 217, the hymn When I survey. 217. And in your hand hold your palm cross. And then remembering Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Good Friday, we'll say together the words of the last verse...

The sermon:

If you were just to read the story of Jesus from the first three gospels, you'd be forgiven for thinking that Palm Sunday was one of the very few times Jesus found himself in Jerusalem. Matthew, Mark and Luke base his ministry predominantly in the north around Galilee. It's John who tells a different tale with a more southern focus. John tells us of Jesus as a regular visitor to Jerusalem, especially at feast times. And maybe John gets it right because even in this morning's reading from Mark it's obvious to the disciples as they collect the colt that Jesus is well known around these parts. They only have to say his name and the animal is there's for the taking.

And so, Palm Sunday begins in the Markan narrative with those beckoning words: *They were now approaching Jerusalem, and when they reached Bethphage and Bethany, close by the Mount of Olives, he sent off two of his disciples.* It sounds almost Shakespearean! The scene is set, and a great drama is about to begin.

These two outlying villages to Jerusalem have colourful names. Bethphage means House of Figs and was considered the limit of a Sabbath days walk from the city, whilst Bethany means House of Dates and was often used as overflow accommodation by pilgrims who couldn't find a bed in the city.

And from here Jesus rides – a journey from village to temple upon a colt, walking on a carpet of cloaks as palm branches were waved and shouts of hosanna rang out.

If you could have time travelled back just 150 years it wouldn't have been a dissimilar scene as Simon Maccabaeus returned to Jerusalem after routing Israel's enemies.

Which means, and here's the rub, the ceremonial that day was all wrong. For although we dilute it down sometimes by saying that riding on a colt rather than a horse meant the king was coming in peace, all the other parts of the day, so reminiscent of Maccabaeus' entrance, spoke of welcoming a King of Power rather than a King of Love. The misunderstandings of Holy Week begin on day one with the irony of Palm Sunday as the crowds welcomed the wrong sort of king.

And maybe the shout of the day showed that too. We often think of Hosanna as a word meaning *praise*. Yet it originally meant *save*. To shout hosanna was to cry for salvation. To wave a palm branch was to welcome home a conquering king.

Palm Sunday echoes a military parade with longings for political liberation. And at its heart the irony is that the wrong sort of king is sitting upon today's donkey, but the only person who seems to appreciate that is him.

Five days later and all that irony takes centre stage at Calvary, yet in truth it's already present on Palm Sunday. Misunderstandings are swirling around and will only grow as Holy Week unravels.

So what is going on in the gospel accounts of this day? Well, maybe the first thing to say is that it probably wasn't as big a parade as we might think. For if it did have all these military and liberation overtones, if a truly huge crowd had welcomed the conquering hero on a colt, then where were the authorities, the arrests, the suppression? Jerusalem was, after all on high alert just in case such scenes broke out. But this entry, unlike Pilate's, isn't registered by the authorities, probably because it was relatively obscure.

Of course, none of the gospels were written the day after. They are not a blow-by-blow historical account but rather an interpretation of events. And sometimes the writers take key passages from the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament, and overlay them on the Jesus story. This embellishment gives the events a greater significance. So, Palm Sunday is framed with references from Zachariah 9 about a king riding a donkey, and Good Friday has Jesus speaking words direct from Psalm 22.

A writer has time to reflect on the narrative they are telling, to weigh up the emphasis they put on each part of the story. The gospels are always a story with a purpose.

However, to have lived those days and to have shouted *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord* would have meant trying to make sense of it all in real time, which is never so easy.

To even call Jesus the *coming one* is to use the expectant language of Messiah-ship. And so, we return to that old question which has dominated our journey through Lent, what sort of Messiah, what sort of King was Jesus?

The confused and, maybe, wrong ceremonial of Palm Sunday leads to the confused and wrong conviction of Good Friday. For on that day Jesus will be crucified as: King of the Jews, he will wear a crown, albeit of thorns, he will be mocked as king in a purple robe and set to die between two revolutionaries. Yet did he ever claim to be any of these things. Was his message ever one of power or insurrection?

I would maintain that Jesus was none of these things. He wasn't the right king upon the donkey or the right person upon a cross. We want to cry out *You've got the wrong man, and this is a miscarriage of justice.*

Instead, Jesus came as the Son of Man. He came in love, in peace and with compassionate justice.

Jesus, the Son of Man, collapses on a cross.

Jesus, the Son of Man, meets violence and power with peace and compassion.

He dies and it is the so-called failure of Jesus that is, ironically and wonderfully, his success. For in dying, he shows faithfulness to love and does not betray his message of compassion.

He was the one who came. But his coming was vastly different to the one that was expected by many in the crowd. And his coming was grossly misrepresented by those who sat in judgment over him, be it in council or palace.

No wonder it took the disciples a long time to digest these events. And the evangelists who wrote the gospels understandably use hindsight to make sense of it all.

So, on Palm Sunday, as we stand at the beginning of Holy Week 2024, I wonder, can we still wave and shout and welcome this Jesus?

Well, in contrast to Mrs Thatcher's famous No, No, No at the dispatch box, I want to say: Yes, Yes, Yes.

Based on three events associated with Holy Week, on Palm Sunday I want to say Yes to the Jesus who overturned the tables of the money changers because he valued justice over profit. Here's an integrity that inspires. A Jesus of passionate conviction who cuts through greed and advocates fairness. I'll follow that Jesus into town.

I want to say Yes to the Jesus of Maundy Thursday who takes a bowl and towel and washes his disciples' feet. With an action greater than any words this is the Jesus who exemplifies service. Here is a compassion that inspires. A Jesus who rolls up his sleeves and gets stuck in. I'll follow that Jesus into town.

And finally, I want to say Yes to the Jesus of the cross who forgives even those who hammered nails into his hands and feet. With words of grace that shamed a theatre of violence Jesus shows us the heart of God. Here is reconciliation. A Jesus who forgives 70 times 7.

On Palm Sunday I want to follow such a Jesus into town. Will you join me and together we'll sing Hosanna.

Thanks be to God. Amen