

PALM SUNDAY 2020

Matthew 21:1-11 Philippians 2:5-11

“Who is this?” The crowds were saying,

Some years ago, the Queen came to open a new building in our city. Thousands of people lined the streets to greet her. I was there with my young children, who waved their flags vigorously as the queen passed and cheered along with the rest. As people were dispersing to go about their ordinary lives, a woman asked, ‘so who was it?’ On hearing it was the Queen, she shrugged, and she too just went on her way.

The day Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, the city was crowded with people who waved their palms and cheered loudly. Some of them asked ‘Who is this?’ and some said he was Jesus the prophet of Nazareth. But if we read on, eventually the crowds dispersed and people continued on their way, going about their ordinary lives and preparing for the Passover Festival.

Today, as we celebrate Palm Sunday, we remember this event, sometimes referred to as the ‘triumphal entry’ into Jerusalem, and we step on in our Lenten journey into Holy Week.

The story, as we are given it across all the gospels, is packed full of symbolism:

- Riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, Matthew tells us, was a fulfilment of Zechariah’s prophecy: ‘Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.’ (Zechariah 9:9).
- Some might have known their scriptures well enough to recall how Solomon rode a mule to his coronation as king (1 Kings 1:33-44).
- Palm branches were customarily used as symbols of joy and triumph on festive occasions (Leviticus 23:40).
- The route taken from the Mount of Olives was the direction from which the Jews expected the Messiah to come.

Perhaps the moment had arrived for Jesus to claim his Kingdom, to be crowned king.

Perhaps when the crowds shouted hosanna, the disciples thought they were part of a victorious procession.

But this was a bitter and poignant moment for Jesus, because at that moment he was not triumphant.

His mission was not yet complete. Jesus did not ride into Jerusalem as a king to claim a throne - but to face death and to hang on a cross.

From the moment Jesus began the journey to Jerusalem, he had warned his disciples it would lead to his death: in Luke’s account Jesus told them: “Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.” But they did not understand what this meant, and they were afraid to ask him about it. (Luke 9:44). Even when they set off down the Mount of Olives, when they put their cloaks on the colt for Jesus to ride, they did not fully understand what was happening. John in his account, suggests his disciples did not understand until after Jesus was glorified and they remembered the things that had been written of him and had been done to him.

And if we are in any doubt, Luke tells us Jesus himself wept. “As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:41-2).

Of course, the gospels were written sometime after Jesus died, so it is impossible to know how much was really understood at that moment. Sometimes it is only when we can look back on events that we understand what was happening and why. Perhaps there *were* some who realised that day who Jesus was beyond recognising him as the man who was a prophet from Nazareth. They might have made a leap of faith and realised here was the promised Messiah. But few it seems really understood the nature of this Messiah.

As they entered the city, people were singing and shouting. Matthew, Mark and John all say they sang ‘hosanna!’ But Luke used words from Psalm 118 ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord’. We think of this perhaps in the same way as those crowds cheering the Queen in my city, but at Passover time it would be usual for pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to be singing from the Psalms of Ascent. Psalm 118 is one of those, and there hosanna is translated in its proper meaning: “Lord save us!” (v25).

In the original Hebrew this would have been “hoshi’a na”, ‘save us now’! So, the cries of the crowd were more like a cry for deliverance. And whether the people shouting hosanna understood why they were shouting or who it was that was passing, Jesus knew *exactly* what he was doing as he entered Jerusalem. The hosannas were *exactly* what he had come to do. But it was not with a mighty army in triumphal procession. This salvation could only be accomplished by the costliest act of love, through the agony of the cross.

And surely that is the point - because there was so much yet to happen.

As we read on, we can see how quickly the shouting died away, how one by one so many turned away, went on with their ordinary lives. Even those closest to Jesus failed him, some denied they ever knew him. But then how quickly the shouting started up again. This time, no hosannas. This time, crucify him. And yet knowing what was before him, Jesus still got on that donkey and rode into the city. He chose to tread the painful road that would lead to his death. Not my will but yours Father, he said, as he prayed in the garden.

Normally on this day instead of a sermon we would read and hear the whole of the Passion Gospel. Someone once asked me why we have to have the Passion Gospel on Palm Sunday. Why can't we just enjoy celebrating the triumphant Jesus as King?

Most explanations tell us that, as the last Sunday before Easter, it is the last time people are likely to attend church before the celebration of the resurrection. And since most people can't, or won't, attend services through the week, there would otherwise be for them a distortion in the story that skips from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to resurrection. So, it has been the practice in Western churches since at least the fourth century to keep the first day of Holy Week by remembering the whole of the passion of Christ

There is something compelling and deeply moving in being in church listening again to the whole account rather than the extracts our gospel readings often provide for us. But this year we do not have a choice to attend church and hear the story again, nor to gather daily to reflect on the events of Holy Week. But we *can* choose not to turn away as many did that day, but to step into Holy Week, creating in our own homes the time and space to read, remember, and reflect on those events that took Jesus from shouts of praise and fleetingly perceived triumph, to the real triumph of resurrection. I often find it helpful, perhaps especially when I am on my own, to read aloud, so that I hear as well as see the words. Often by doing this, the power and meaning come alive in new ways or new insights are discovered.

But the most important reason for combining the Palms and Passion is the way it sets before us the inseparable relationship between the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that brought us life and hope. This is what is at the heart of our faith. This is what we remember today. Jesus did not stop at entering Jerusalem but gave himself up to death on the cross - and on the third day rose again. God's love did not fail. The triumph was to come in the triumph of love over death.

So today, when we hear again the question of the crowds 'who is this?', we *can* rejoice, we *can* give praise and glory to our king, because we know, not just that this is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth, but this is the one who was truly the Son of God, who gave his life for us. And as in these days as we tread a painful and difficult path of our own, we pray we soon will be able to gather again to worship and celebrate it together. Hosanna - blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord. To him be glory for ever. Amen.

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