

Message for Palm Sunday (5th April 2020)

After one of the strangest Lents that anyone can remember, at last we have arrived at Holy Week. It will take quite a feat of the imagination for us to enter into the Church's celebration of this week in isolation, because the whole idea of this week is that we join together to accompany Jesus. Today we imagine ourselves as part of a great excited crowd of people flooding into Jerusalem and finding, as we do so, that we are part of a royal entrance procession. We will have to work quite hard to imagine the sight of the endless crowd, the deafening sound of all the voices, the excited shouting and calling out, the noise of the animals, and all the pushing and the shoving as the crowd squeezes into the city gate of Jerusalem.

But this year, as every year, this joyful entry procession of a king and all his followers makes us feel uneasy, too. All these people are crying 'Hosanna' and 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' but we know how the story ends. We know, even as the crowds don't, that in a few days the same people will not be shouting joyful 'Hosannas', but a hate-filled 'Crucify him'. What makes us uneasy is the question: what makes them change? And more unsettling still: what about us – will we resist the temptation to switch from hosanna to crucify?

You can see why people would get caught up in the excitement of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. Hidden within the detail are signs that pierce us to the core. The Jewish people are very used to rulers who look down on them, lord it over them, oppress them and milk them for cash, discover someone offering a different sort of rule. At last here is a ruler, a king, who will not use them and trample on them, not look down from high above them. A king on a donkey, his feet almost trailing on the ground and his eyes at pretty well the same level as the people standing around him might look ridiculous to a Roman on a huge warhorse, but he is deeply comforting to the crowd. At last we have a ruler who is one of us. And they spread their garments before him, just as in the past the generals laid their garments out for the new King Jehu to walk on; and they wave palm branches, just as the priests used palms to purify the Temple after it had been defiled in the time of the Maccabees; and the human voices, together with the donkey and the palms mean that humans, and the animal kingdom, and the plant world, all unite to proclaim a king. Then as the procession arrives at the city there is proof that this is not some little party to be easily written off. St Matthew says that the whole city was shaken. It is an unusual word this shaken: it will occur again twice more in the coming week; once when Jesus dies, and again when he rises. The city is shaken to its core.

But all the same, we know that this fickle crowd will disperse, and then will turn against him. What is it all about? The crowd are full of excitement when the adrenalin is running and they are all buzzing, but it will soon turn. In the coming days it almost seems as if Jesus goes out of his way to turn people against him. On Monday he goes to the Temple and throws over the tables of the traders and moneychangers and tells them they have turned a house of prayer into a den of thieves. Everything the people are used to doing at this most sacred time is overturned. And then the following day he is back teaching, challenging and disturbing. Six times in quick succession he says ‘Woe to you Pharisees, hypocrites, blind guides’. It seems that he almost deliberately sets about turning all the people against him. But what he is really doing is saying to the people, from the greatest to the least: ‘You need to look again; everything you think you know about God, you need to look at it again. His greatness is found in humility, not in power; he does not respond to hate with violence, but by soaking up all the hate, wrestling with it, and overpowering it.’ He invites everyone who thinks they know everything about God, to look again. That is the whole function of Holy Week. The crowds turn against Jesus because he doesn’t live up to their idea of what God should be like, but Jesus refuses to be shrunk into their idea of God. Look again. In so much of the world people think that they know what God is like, and some of them choose to reject him or to ignore him, and to all of them Holy Week says ‘Look again’. Look at the story of Holy Week, beginning on this day, and you will see that it is a story that answers our deepest longings. A mighty empire is challenged by a single man; the structures of power, with their monopoly on all communication, are challenged by a single man; the idea that power is the sign of greatness, all this is challenged, and it all comes crashing down when the tomb is found to be empty.

Today Jesus challenges us all to go beyond what we think about God, our settled routine assumptions, and to plunge deeply into a world where humility, gentleness, simplicity, generosity and self-giving are the real marks of greatness. In these strange times we are discovering the extraordinary attraction of just this message, as those are the very things that stand out for us as rays of hope in a world that is sick. Our experience perfectly matches the message of Holy Week. The world is not as we thought it was, and we are challenged to see that much of what we assume about God is incomplete too – too small, too dull, too easily dismissed. Look again, and you will see that Jesus shows us how all that we most long for, most desire, and most hope to see when the present crisis is over. Just before Palm Sunday, the last story on Jesus’ way to Jerusalem, is his meeting with two blind men at Jericho. Asked what they want, they say ‘Lord, let our eyes be opened’. That is the curtain raiser to Holy Week, and we would do well to make it our prayer as the week begins.