

Palm Sunday

Readings: Mark 11 v 1-11, Mark chapter 14 and 15.

There are many readings that can be used on Palm Sunday, however the principal ones which I have given here, are the ones that are used to tell of the events through Holy Week. It begins with the glorious entry of Jesus into Jerusalem through to the Garden of Gethsemane and on to the crucifixion on Good Friday.

Palm Sunday for me is one of those Sundays that put a smile on my face, for it gives the church an opportunity to have some fun. The church I went to as a youngster used Palm Sunday as one of the highlights of its year. The congregation would process around the local streets singing seasonal hymns. I think this is the reason I try to do something similar in the churches that I have led. So we have processed around church grounds to going out of the gate and walking round the streets. We were even blessed with a donkey on one occasion. If ever you have taken part in such an event you will know it makes for a good deal of fun and laughter as people try to keep up with one another. I tell the children to imagine what it would be like if the queen came or a famous pop star and every one was cheering. Palm Sunday is also the Sunday we receive our palm crosses.

Nevertheless, it does demonstrate in a very active way something of that first entry into Jerusalem with Jesus riding on a donkey. I do not know if any of you have ridden on a donkey, but it is far from comfortable and the noise surely must have frightened the beast. I have never thought of Jesus as gentle, meek, or mild and I think it must have taken some strength to control the animal. A donkey is always seen as a humble creature. One never imagines a great leader riding on such a poor man's beast of burden. No, they would be on a horse giving them great height and stature, a real status symbol. But here is the greatest leader of all, humbly riding on a donkey. The donkey also gives us a link to Christmas too, as we associate his birth with a humble donkey which his mother is always depicted as riding.

There must have been a great deal of emotion pouring out that day as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. The disciples must have been bewildered, apprehensive and even perhaps a little afraid, at the response of the crowd. Did all of the population of Jerusalem really know who Jesus was? Had they heard of him and perhaps for some this was the first opportunity to see him in the flesh? What too of the authorities? The Temple leaders who had a tight grip on the teaching of Jewish religious law, and here was Jesus undermining their orthodoxy. Then we have the governing Roman Protectorate, were they looking at Jesus with a certain amount of interest? There had been a number of insurrections, and charismatic leaders from the Jewish populous which they had dealt with in the past, was this going to be another one?

The Romans must have been very watchful that day with a great number of questions on their minds. One might have been, "Will this cheering crowd turn into a riot and will we need to call out the troops?" In the last few days we have all seen how easily that can happen, where a demonstration can turn into something quite violent and nasty. This surely must have coloured the events that took place later in the week. We also know how a crowd can turn under certain conditions, and just because it happened two thousand years ago, it does not make people so very different than now. The execution of Jesus seems almost inevitable to us now in hindsight, but how many of his friends thought so then? There were many who truly feared it and wanted him to turn away from Jerusalem and

hide. His disciples and friends loved him and naturally they did not want the dreaded outcome of his death. Any friends would not want that to happen, but the disciples failed to recognise Jesus's purpose and determination to follow the Father's will.

But even with that in mind, Jesus also feared his death himself. We are reminded of this when reading of his prayer and anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane. He begged his friends to stay awake, he did not want to be left alone. Surely his prayer is very close to many of our prayers that we have had this year. How many of us have discovered emotions within ourselves over this year that we never imagined because of the stress brought about by covid. Even my grandson who is five years old said to me, "I wish this virus would go away I want to play with my mates." Jesus's own heartfelt prayer was, "Father, if it be your will, take this cup from me." In the hymn, "My song is love unknown", the fifth verse says, "yet cheerfully he to suffering goes". Unless the meaning of cheerfully has changed, I do not believe this to be true. Willingly, bravely, even obediently he might have gone, but cheerfully, no I do not think so. Not because of any weakness on the part of Jesus, but it would not have been a truly human response. Jesus was human, he did not pretend to be human, he was fully human. So like us he laughed, he cried, he loved his family, his friends, and he enjoyed their company. We know this by the accounts we read when he is with Martha, Mary and Lazarus in their home, or at the last supper. Perhaps a little known fact is that there are more accounts of feasts and people eating together in the New Testament than there are healings. He loved life and as such he would not have wanted to die. I remember a dear friend of mine saying to me the night before she died, and whilst looking at her sons, she said "Angela it hurts." She was not referring to the pain of the cancer but of leaving her family. That was the response that Jesus made too, which makes it all the more a sacrifice. If it was easy for him, the cost would not have been as great as it was. His sacrifice was immense and it was through his love for us that he did it.

Sadly, much like last year, Holy Week will not be the same as the years that have gone before and far from what we would hope. We will not be able to meet closely, or have the interactive services that we might have wanted, even if we can have those few services that we can plan. Nevertheless, I still think it is important that we try to follow some spiritual discipline during this Holy Week, either alone or with a prayer partner. I believe it is the one week that should be central to the practice of our Christian faith and learning. To journey through Holy Week, and by taking the time to make a few steps each day, can give us a powerful insight into the heart of God. It allows us the space to pray and reflect once again on the sacrifice of Jesus with a sense of awe and thanksgiving. We truly know he identifies fully with us, and as such, is with us in our pain, our joys, our triumphs and sadness. Jesus is there with us always. That is our greatest conciliation and a blessed gift to us. Then after our Holy Week journey, which included Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we can celebrate with joy the glorious triumph of Easter Sunday where death is turned to resurrection, hope and salvation. We can shout "Alleluia Christ has risen, he is risen indeed."

God bless you all.

Angela.

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