

Lent 6 Palm Sunday Matthew 27:11-54

And so holy week begins and we move from Lent to Passiontide, our focus moves from predictions of the end of Jesus' earthly ministry to the realities of it. Although we are just at the beginning of this week the readings are already drawing us to the crucifixion, a reminder of how quickly the shouts went from hosanna to crucify him.

And yet there is so much more this week to experience. We will be reminded of the events of this week which saw Jesus reclaim the temple from the money changers and thieves back to its intended purpose as a sanctuary of prayer. We will see Jesus take time in Bethany to have his feet anointed by precious and expensive oil in what would become clear later was a pre-emptive burial ritual. We will become aware that there is a betrayer in the midst of the disciples and that he was the last person anyone could have expected. We will be partakers of the ultimate symbol of service as we re-create Jesus act of washing the feet of his disciples and we will share a most holy of Holy Eucharists as we remember that first Eucharistic meal. All of that to come before even the night in Gethsemane and the events of Good Friday – it was quite a week!

But before all that we need to focus on today, Palm Sunday, the most wonderful moment of Jesus' fulfilment of the prophecy that the messiah would enter Jerusalem on a beast of burden, nothing was done that had not been foretold. Let us think about the event from various points of view, the disciples, the crowd and Jesus himself.

It is a moment when the disciples must have felt they were actually winning. There had been times of great success in their ministry, lots of followers, 5000+ listening to Jesus preach, there had also been times of fear and worry, when the Pharisees had sought to stone Jesus for alleged blasphemy and after the healing of the man possessed by legion of demons when the people were so disturbed by what they saw they implored Jesus to leave them alone.

But here, finally they were in Jerusalem and the people seemed to understand. They saw Jesus as the messiah that his disciples already knew him to be. The followers of Jesus must have, for the first time, felt like they were achieving something with this mission.

To be hailed and welcomed in this way surely would also have taken them by surprise. It may even have made them a little suspicious, but Jesus was just going with the flow, waving and riding his donkey, accepting the adulation on this occasion when so often before he had shied away from too much attention. Things were changing, that much was clear, but no one could have anticipated how quickly the crowd would turn.

People can be so fickle, and mob mentality is even worse, we are so easily led by charismatic leaders for good or bad. We love to think of ourselves as being able to rule our own destiny or be able to stand our ground whatever goes on around us, but all too often we are influenced by all sorts of people and things. This Palm Sunday perhaps we can also consider the crowd welcoming Jesus in. They had heard of Jesus, many of them would have seen him teach over the previous 3 years, they were aware of his miraculous reputation, perhaps the news of Lazarus' resurrection was still being circulated. Whatever the circumstance, Jesus created a buzz wherever he went and the crowd were wound up to a frenzied state.

And how familiar is that to us that we can be at times in our faith journey, completely fired up by Jesus, utterly taken by his word and example, and we can clearly see he is our saviour and Lord. And yet, just like that crowd, so easily turned, it can be easy for us also to turn away from Jesus. Sometimes we can't see an answer to our prayers and we are uninspired to read our scripture and the cares of the world take hold. We can be influenced and distracted away from Jesus and perhaps in those moments we understand what it was like for that crowd.

But what of Jesus? How must he have felt riding that donkey, everyone looking, expectations beyond reasonable. It reminds me a bit of the hype before the inauguration of President Obama in the US, everyone was so frenzied about the concept that they were about to see a black man become president that they put unimaginable pressure and expectations on someone who is, of course, simply a man. The colour of his skin neither makes him a better nor worse prospect for president and perhaps his greatest achievement was simply being able to function as president at all with all the hype. I wonder if Jesus was feeling crushed by the same sort of pressure. Of course, he was not just a man but he also had no intention of resolving the problems faced by the Jews in the way they were expecting him to. Our Servant King was going to defeat the enemy through sacrifice. There would be no holy war and the enemy wasn't even the Romans.

So as we imagine that scene again, let us remember how much was really going on. Not simply a beloved leader being welcomed by those who appreciated him, but the first steps of the lamb of God moving towards his sacrifice of his own free will. That is the powerful image of Palm Sunday.

As we take these palm crosses home with us today and find a space for them in our homes and lives over the next year, may they remind us of the complexities of Jesus and our relationship with him. His mystery and simplicity, his glory and his sacrifice.