

Palm Sunday: Jesus' entry into Jerusalem

Reflection by Rev' Peter Shaw

The powerful effect of a crowd can be a positive force. Having consciously chosen to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, our regular meeting together for worship and Christian fellowship helps to reinforce in us our Christian conviction and the life choices we make can counter the strong pressures of media and peer opinion. In this difficult time of isolation, it is so important that we try to carry on as a Christian community, albeit in a different way, as much as is possible.

Hosanna!

In today's Gospel reading, the Passover feast was drawing near. Pilgrims from all over Palestine were coming to Jerusalem. Pilgrims from other parts of the Roman Empire were coming too.

Some of those pilgrims were coming this particular year with added expectation - Jesus was coming into Jerusalem. Perhaps this would be the time of declaration that many of them had been waiting for - the public disclosure and recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. Surely that would be a time of great joy for the Jews - and terror for the Romans! We have to remember that the Jews were an oppressed people under Roman occupation and a belief had developed amongst them that the Messiah would restore the Jewish nation to its' previous worldly power and glory, which was not of course what Jesus and His mission was about.

Feeding all this expectant excitement was the recent news that Jesus had raised to life Lazarus of Bethany. Lazarus had been dead for four days. The whole incident was well known to all the people of Bethany, and Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem. Inevitably an event like this soon became common knowledge in Jerusalem as well.

As they drew near to the village of Bethphage, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, Jesus asked two of his disciples to fetch a colt that they would find tethered with its mother near the entrance to the village.

This may have been a surprise to his disciples and the crowd alike. Surely a horse would be more fitting for the one coming as conqueror and king! -----

Surely here was the place and time where he would be publicly declared as Messiah. Perhaps it would also be the appropriate place for rallying support for an uprising against Rome and a re-establishment of an independent kingdom of Israel. After all, Jesus had said a great deal about the Kingdom of heaven and the embodiment of this in an earthly state wouldn't be unexpected in the least.

But as he declared himself, Jesus was deliberately fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9.9-10

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and having salvation,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the war-horses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

No, this was probably not quite what the crowd had expected.

As the pilgrims approached Jerusalem they began calling out, according to the usual practice the words of what are known as the Hallel Psalms - Psalms 113 to 118 which were sung at the Feast of Passover. With Jesus there riding the colt, they could see an added significance to the traditional words.

Shouts of joy and victory
resound in the tents of the righteous:
"The Lord's right hand has done mighty things!
The Lord's right hand is lifted high;
the Lord's right hand has done mighty things!" (Ps. 118.15-16)
Open for me the gates of righteousness;
I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. (v. 19)

The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvellous in our eyes.
This is the day the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
O Lord, save us;
O Lord, grant us success.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
From the house of the Lord we bless you. (vv. 22-26)

The shout of "Hosanna!" simply comes from the Hebrew of v. 25 - "Save us, we pray!" It became a particular shout of the crowd as they believed themselves to be at the great moment of fulfilment.

The traditional words were just so appropriate as they escorted Jesus into the holy city. Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Excitedly they cut down palm branches and spread their cloaks on the road. As the crowd entered Jerusalem, the whole city was thrown into an uproar – can you just imagine the scene, the noise – the euphoria!

There has been a lot of speculation whether the same crowd that called out "Hosanna!" later called out "Crucify him!" There were many people in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. We need not assume that the same people were involved, though we are aware of the fickleness of crowds.

What were the expectations of the crowd? What had Jesus come to do? Was the "Hosanna! Save us!" an indication of a people caught up in their nationalistic desires?

And what are our expectations? They went to the Temple. We go to church. What do we expect God to do? But perhaps this question ought to be reversed – what does God expect us to do with all the blessings he has given us?

In the midst of the worldwide corona virus pandemic, it is easy to get lost and confused and be unsure how we can serve God.

I believe that we carry on but in a different way. As a Christian community whilst maintaining social isolation, we continue to help others around us if we are able, particularly supporting those who are vulnerable. We can keep in touch with each other in our Christian family through phone calls, social media or maybe write a letter. Offering and receiving support will give us all the strength and encouragement to live our faith daily.

And above all pray. Pray for our communities and indeed the world as the human race grapples with one of the most serious issues it has had to deal in several generations.

And a prayer for our times:

Lord God, we entrust to you the families and communities affected by Coronavirus, wherever they may be.

We pray especially for health care workers, that you may guide and protect them.

We pray that your Spirit might inspire those researching new medicines and treatments.

And in the midst of this, keep us strong in faith, hope and love. Grant us the courage and perseverance to be good neighbours.

May the words of your Son Jesus Christ in the Lord's Prayer be our prayer, as we entrust ourselves and those who are affected to your infinite power and love.

Amen.