

**Reflection for Palm Sunday** by Jacqueline Kemp, Lay Reader.

"Gentle Jesus meek and mild, look on me a little child." A prayer used in Christian homes and offered too in the Sunday Schools of my youth. Then it was often the case that children were sent to Sunday School on Sunday afternoons by parents who were not church-goers but thought that we would be persuaded to be good, and enjoy the benefits of annual outings to the sea-side and a Christmas party. I always refrain from singing one verse in a popular carol which has the line, "Christian children all must be mild, obedient, good as He."

If this is how Jesus is perceived by the population at large, no wonder they do not want to join us. I know that Jesus was compassionate; he cared for the sick, the troubled and, in Luke's gospel in particular, showed respect for the marginalised. But he wasn't meek and mild. He preached with passion about the coming of the Kingdom of God. He upset the tables in the Temple which affronted the Jewish religious establishment. He drew large crowds of followers, which alarmed the occupying Roman authorities. It seemed to them that he would lead a rebellion..... and then he entered Jerusalem, at a major Jewish festival, when the city was crowded with people, riding on a donkey.

The crowd was ecstatic. They pulled palm branches off the trees and waved them, shouting, "Hail, God bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord! God bless the kingdom of our ancestor David." This was, to say the least a demonstration, maybe the beginning of a riot. It was Rev'd Michael who memorably told us that the palm branches were more than just an old world version of placards. Before the arrival of the Romans, the palm tree had been a potent symbol of the Jewish nation. It was even on the coins. Basically this crowd was saying, "Romans go home."

How were the authorities to react? Look at news reports about Hong Kong and Myanmar in the past few weeks. The Romans prided themselves on their well disciplined army, but this situation was overwhelming and they decided not to use force. For an alternative, look to what has happened in Russia. The leader of the opposition has been arrested, charged in court, imprisoned. What next?

So the Roman authorities did not move in with force but neither did Jesus lead the people in an invasion on the Temple in Jerusalem or other centres of power, to the disappointment of some of his followers. As we know, the Roman authorities waited until after the celebration of Passover and with the collusion of the Jewish leaders, aided by the betrayal of one of his disciples, Jesus was arrested by temple guards, in the dark, in a quiet olive grove.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week when we follow the events of the last week of Jesus's life to the Crucifixion and the glorious Easter resurrection. The palm cross that we each receive at this service, simple and small as it is, is a potent symbol of the events of that week which are at the centre of our faith. Firstly, it is made from a palm leaf, folded by Christians in countries warmer than ours.

Secondly it is folded into the shape of a cross, the symbol of the Crucifixion and of all Christians. As well as Church of England Sunday school, I had my education in a Roman Catholic school due partly to pressure from lapsed Catholics in the grandparent generation. Here everywhere, in the chapel, in classrooms, was a crucifix, that is a cross with Jesus hanging, a depiction of the crucifixion. But that is not the end of the story. At Easter Jesus rose from the dead. The crosses in reformed churches, like the Church of England, are empty. Christ has risen!

So this is the third meaning of the palm cross we hold in our hand, an empty cross, the symbol of the triumph of Christ over death,

What do we do with our cross when we take it home? Some people will use it as a marker in their Bible. Others put it in the kitchen to remind them of their faith when they are going about their normal life. There is one above my desk. My family always has more than one, so we put one on the front door as a witness to all callers that this is a Christian household. I pray that this Palm Sunday, despite all the restrictions, will be a blessing to us all.