

Reflection for Palm Sunday by Rev'd Peter Shaw

Dear Friends

Sometimes a crowd seems to have a mind of its' own. Some people have talked about mass psychology and the things that people do in a crowd that they would never do individually. Even a celebrating football team and their fans may get up to things together they wouldn't do as individuals – as we frequently hear and see in the News!

The powerful effect of a crowd can also be positive. Having consciously chosen to follow Our Lord Jesus Christ, our regular meeting together for worship helps to reinforce us both in Christian conviction and life-style - over and against the strong pressures of media and peer opinion in what is essentially a very materialistic and frequently selfish world. People who are individually persuaded and committed to following Jesus Christ can receive strength and encouragement together, which will help them in their daily and individual expression of the faith; **this is why church communities like ours are so very vital.**

Hosanna!

In our reading on the Liturgy of the Palms, 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 that 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 great consternation - and perhaps fear - for the Romans!

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

A small crowd of pilgrims clustered around Jesus and his twelve disciples. 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 disciples and crowd alike. Surely a horse would be more fitting for the one coming as conqueror and king! But as he declared himself, Jesus was deliberately fulfilling the prophecy in Zechariah Chapter 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.

Mark and Luke tell us that the colt had never been ridden before, Matthew that the mother was brought along too. It was a unique occasion, though 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 these traditional words from Psalm 118:

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 meaning "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! Can you just imagine the scene, can you put yourself in the place of someone who was there? – the noise, the bustling commotion, the heat.

Excitedly the crowd cut down palm branches and spread their cloaks on the road. As the crowd entered Jerusalem, the whole city was thrown into an uproar. People were asking, "Who is this?" Some of them were visitors, of course. Up to this point they hadn't heard of Jesus. "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." For others, the question may have meant, "This Jesus whom we have heard about - perhaps even seen and heard - who is he really?"

In the Temple

There wouldn't have been the least bit of surprise that Jesus and the crowd moved into the Temple. Surely here was the place 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, particularly bearing in mind the then current thinking of the Jewish Hierarchy, such a pronouncement wouldn't be unexpected in the least.

True the Jewish leaders weren't exactly "on side". But surely as they considered Jesus' credentials and the measure of his popular support, they would be won over. Hosanna to the Son of David!

So what happened next must have been an unpleasant surprise. Matthew and Luke tell us in their gospels that Jesus boldly and directly confronted the buying and selling that went on in the Temple. He made himself a whip and started to drive out all who were trading there - overturning the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves. He said, "It is written, 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a den of robbers!"

In Isaiah Chapter 56, we hear the Lord saying to the foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord: serve him, love his name, worship him, keep the Sabbath and hold fast to the covenant, "these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." (v. 7).

The part of the Temple where people of other nations were permitted to come was called the Court of the Gentiles. It was here that the buying and selling was taking place. Certainly no place for prayer, and perhaps a reflection on the fact that although the Jews of the time - as God's chosen people - were tasked by Him to take news of His overwhelming love to the Gentiles, the Jewish authorities allowed these profane activities to take place in a part of the Temple supposed to be dedicated to the Gentiles.

It is also highly likely that this Court of the Gentiles became the place where, according to Luke, Jesus taught over the next few days and interestingly this is when He preached the parable of the wicked tenants. The burning anger of the Jewish leadership was becoming steadily reinforced in its resolve to stop all this before it went too far.

What had Jesus come to do?

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 it is highly likely that those shouting Hosanna in praise of Our Lord were numbered amongst those who were calling for his crucifixion only a short time later, a sad and stark reminder of the fickleness of human beings, whether in crowds or not. Certainly, Our Lord is portrayed as having only a very small band of open supporters at the end.

What were the expectations of the crowd? What had Jesus come to do?

Was the "Hosanna! Save us!" too much caught up in the nationalistic desires of the people? Had the actions and words of Jesus in cleansing the Temple embarrassingly exposed for the Jewish leaders and too many of the people, their very low priority for prayer and praise?

And what are **our** expectations? They went to the Temple, we go to church. What do **we** expect Jesus to do?

What are we hoping for? Some changes in government policy? A bit of a break? Some alteration in "them" – the others, our enemies?

Well no, not quite.

Jesus has come to deal with the wrongs in us, rather than in "them"! - not the Roman garrison whose watch-tower overlooked the Temple, but the Temple itself! In 70AD the Roman armies would destroy the Temple after laying siege to it following the First Jewish Roman War, but already it had been destroyed as a house of prayer, **not just for the Jewish nation, but for all nations!**

So as we draw ever nearer to celebrating Easter, the death and rising from the dead of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, let us ponder on the fact that not just the Jews, but Gentiles as well, i.e. us, were instrumental in having Him put to a very painful and humiliating death. We all bear culpability for this act and whenever we sin against our Heavenly Father, we demonstrate the sinfulness of the human condition which caused it.

Let us also ponder on how much these events, the death and resurrection shook the old established order – the Jewish Faith at that time was not fit for purpose in that it did not take the message of God's love to all His people, or the Jews themselves! This changed after Pentecost when the message of God's love was taken to everyone by the Disciples, empowered by the Holy Spirit - work still in progress – **through us!**

And finally **let us also ponder on the fact that as followers of Christ, it is now down to us, in churches and Christian communities like this one here to spread the Good News of God's love to all His people, whoever and wherever they are.**

AMEN
