

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Palm Sunday

Please read through these passages slowly and reflectively before reading my sermon.

Isaiah 50:4-9a Psalm 31:9-16 Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 21:1-11 and Matthew 27:14-27:66

In writing and reading may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

As I read through these familiar texts from Matthew's Gospel (the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the Passion account in its fullness) what jumped out at me as I read them this year is just how crowded they are.

If I watch the news at the moment, or see images from places around the world, streets are empty, if people are in the picture they are a long way apart unless in family groups. They greet each other with a wave across the street. I don't even have to watch the television to notice this – it is happening in the street outside the Rectory too. Very quickly, very wisely, very compassionately we have learnt this thing called social distancing. Thank God we as humans can be that adaptable when it matters, however much we might not like it. I think I have adapted so much that I am super-sensitive when watching dramas or footage shot in times past: when people shook hands, or gathered closely or hugged on greeting, now I find myself wincing! Perhaps then it is not surprising that what I noticed in the extended story telling of our gospels for Palm Sunday was the amount of close human contact, and the crowds!

It is very likely that Jerusalem was more crowded than usual, with people gathering at a holy time to keep Passover together.

Two crowds in particular stand out. First, the "very large crowd " who spread their cloaks like a red carpet for Jesus, and cut down branches to do the same if they had no cloak. This is a crowd full

of adulation who think they know who Jesus is and what he is here for:

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

This is the language of the Messianic hope of that era – the hope that the prophecies of God raising up a descendent of the great King David to restore a golden kingdom like his were coming true.

“This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth”. This is the language of hope that God will once more speak directly to the people of God by a prophet as in the times gone by.

This large crowd is full of the expectation that Jesus will act dramatically, powerfully, decisively, to transform their experience of Roman oppression and carry them in on a wave to share in his victory.

This is a crowd that represents something that is oh so common in our human experience – and excitement about and dependence on a promise of instant change, the desire for what we have yearned for to be given to us now. This crowd stirs up a tumult, a heightened expectation, a demand; but its members have not fully understood who Jesus is, or what deeper and more demanding freedom he will bring about in the days to come. And such whipped up enthusiasm can very easily come crashing down when it is disappointed.

The second crowd is the crowd who cry for Jesus’ death when, according to Matthew, they are manipulated by their leaders to reject Pilate’s offer to free Jesus.

“Let him be crucified” is their cry. This is a cry of violence and hatred, perhaps of let-down after the hope of a week before.

This is the cry of a crowd who no longer think for themselves but will rally to join those who shout loudest and have the strongest

apparent grievance, or to please those from whom they may expect a reward.

As such, this crowd represents a deep trait in the human condition that the power of the collective, group-think, can provoke emotions in such strength that people would not recognise them as their own if they stepped away from the crowd.

It is common, in the liturgy of Palm Sunday (and again on Good Friday) for this Passion story to be read in a dramatic way with the whole church congregation taking the part of the crowd. We hear ourselves shout for Jesus' crucifixion and have the chance to catch ourselves, to notice how that feels and wonder what we are doing. It's a way of reminding ourselves that we are all part of the story; it was people like us, with our failings and foibles who both adored Jesus at the beginning of the week and called for his death at the end. It is an experience of recognising our shared responsibility. Each year it is a profound way of entering into the story.

But this is not a year for crowds.

This year we are reading this gospel alone, in our own time, and this gives us a chance to step back and reflect on where we want to choose to be in the story.

How will we welcome Jesus in to Jerusalem?

How will we react when Pilate offers to release him?

In this story there is one figure who remains resolutely separate from the crowds. The one who, even as he journeys towards fully identifying with all that brings suffering to human nature, remains steadfastly himself. The one who is at the centre of the story yet is often silent, or ahead of or apart from those around him.

The one who dies feeling abandoned even by God.

Yes, Jesus.

Perhaps, this particular Holy Week when we can't walk the way of the cross as part of the loud crowds, when we have had to learn

to take a step back from bustling activity, when some of us might feel lonely or distressed because we can't share this holy season in the usual way; perhaps we are being invited into a way of focusing more fully on the solitary man at the heart of the story.

Perhaps we might ask Jesus to show us what he wants us to see about his Passion this Holy Week.

What does he make of the adulation on Palm Sunday?

What is he really trying to give us at the supper in the upper room?

What is he seeking from us in the Garden of Gethsemane?

What did he feel as he was arrested, tried and taken to crucifixion?

What does Jesus want us to learn anew about himself, his love for us, what his death and resurrection offers us, as we walk with him this year?

The invitation is to give ourselves the time to sit with these questions and see what God might show us.

May this uncrowded Holy Week Journey be full of new grace for us all.

It is my prayer too, that as we each travel this Holy Week in Jesus' company away from the crowds, as we draw closer to him, we discover that even at a physical distance we are drawn closer to one another in his love. Amen.