

Palm Sunday Reading, Reflection and Prayers

Collect for Palm Sunday

True and humble king,
hailed by the crowd as Messiah;
grant us the faith to know you and love you,
that we may be found beside you
on the way of the cross,
which is the path of glory.

Palm Gospel: Matthew 21.1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 'Tell the daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

The disciples went and did as Jesus directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Reflection

There are some things that we notice most when they are not there. There are times when an absence of a sight or a sound is more remarkable than its presence. It is the paradox made famous in the Sherlock Holmes story that tells of the "curious incident of the dog in the night-time". The all-important clue for the great detective was not a dog barking, but the silence when the dog failed to bark at its usual time.

For many, especially those living or working in towns and cities, it is the silence and the emptiness of streets and shopping centres that are usually noisy and bustling that is one of the most striking aspects of the current 'lockdown'. A friend described the absence of people in these once crowded places as "eerie". I understand what she meant. But I was encouraged by another friend to think of the silence and absence more positively. This is not a sign that humanity has been wiped out, like in the disaster movies that the scenes of empty city centres may remind us of. Rather, it is a sign that people are showing their humanity and their responsibility by heeding the advice to stay at home wherever possible. In contrast, there was something disturbing in the scenes a couple of weeks earlier, of people flocking to beaches and beauty spots for one last get together in the sunshine. There is a time to gather in crowds, and there is a time to stay at home.

So maybe there is something jarring in the episode in the life of Jesus that we think about and remember today. A central feature of the Palm Sunday story is the crowd. The streets are lined with people, tightly packed, crowding together in their excitement to see Jesus riding into Jerusalem. They shout out with a common voice their chants of 'Hosanna', like supporters in a football stadium, cheering their team. We hear the story this year at a time when sports stadia stand empty (or, like Edgbaston cricket ground, have been turned over to other uses to combat the pandemic), and no crowds are out on the streets.

The authorities in Jesus' day, in common with political leaders in all times and places, recognised that crowds pose a potential danger. It is not only viral infection that can spread rapidly through a large assembly of people. Rumours and resentments, plots and protests, can all be disseminated and magnified through the gathering of a crowd. Palm Sunday was the moment at which the political and religious leaders in Jerusalem will have sensed that the Jesus movement, in which an outsider from Nazareth was being hailed as Messiah, King of the Jews, could not be dismissed as harmless and insignificant. Under such a leader, these people could turn the world upside down. The sequence of events that would lead to Jesus' crucifixion is being set in train through the crowd's cries of Hosanna.

For good or ill, there is power in a crowd. Both violent revolutions and peaceful movements of liberation alike have begun when the people have taken to the streets and joined their voices and actions as one. I wonder what that may have to say to us at a time when gathering in this way is impossible?

At Morning Prayer recently, I read with a wry smile words in the reading from the letter to the Hebrews that urged Christians not to give up meeting together "as is the habit of some". When we cannot physically gather together as church, the importance of developing other ways of staying connected with each other and with God becomes heightened. The same is true of our wider communities; the network of neighbours and volunteers that have emerged is an encouraging sign. We can't be a crowd; but we can be a community and we can be church.

All of which brings me to a final thought. On this Palm Sunday, there will be no procession through the streets of Kingsbury, accompanied by a donkey, as has often happened in the past. But I believe something of the spirit of Palm Sunday was seen in this and other villages very recently. On Thursday evening at 8pm, in Church Lane where I live as on many other streets, householders emerged from their confinement to stand outside their homes to cheer and applaud the NHS and other key workers. Albeit standing at a safe distance from our neighbours, we were together, banging saucepan lids and clapping hands. It felt a profoundly moving, significant and hope-filled experience.

We will be getting used to silence and solitude over the coming weeks. But may that not lead to isolation or individualism, but to a greater sharing in care for one another. And let us rejoice when the silence is broken by the sound of cheering in the streets.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Let us pray to the Father,
who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to give us life.

Simon from Cyrene was forced to carry the cross for your Son.

Give us grace to lift heavy loads from those we meet
and to stand with those condemned to die.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Your Son watched the soldiers gamble to share his clothes.

Transform the hearts of those who make a profit from their victims,
and those whose hearts are hardened by their work.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us

The thief, who was crucified with Jesus,
was promised a place in your kingdom.

Give pardon and hope, healing and peace
to all who look death in the face.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us

From the cross Jesus entrusted Mary his mother
and John his disciple to each other's care.

Help us also to care for one another
and fill our homes with the spirit of your love.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us

In Mary and John your Son created a new family at the cross.

Fill our relationships, and those of new families today,
with mutual care and responsibility,
and give us a secure hope for the future.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us

The centurion was astonished to see your glory in the crucified Messiah.

Open the eyes of those who do not know you
to see in your Son the meaning of life and death.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us

Joseph of Arimathea came to take your Son's body away.

Give hope and faith to the dying and bereaved,
and gentleness to those who minister to them.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us

Simon and Joseph, Mary and John
became part of your Church in Jerusalem.
Bring into your Church today a varied company of people,
to walk with Christ in the way of his passion
and to find their salvation in the victory of his cross.

Lord of the Church,
hear our prayer,
and make us one in heart and mind
to serve you in Christ our Lord.

(from Common Worship: Times and Seasons © The Archbishops' Council 2006)