

## Palm Sunday Matthew 21:1-11 5.04.2020

10 days ago, at about 10 to 8 in the evening we set off as a family down our drive to express our support of NHS workers. We didn't know what to expect - to the one side of our house we have the church, and to the other side the big old vicarage, now a commercial property - so we felt we might have produced a little isolated applause. However just before 8.00 the volume of noise from our road and neighbouring streets grew and we had a powerful sense that the whole community were rising up as one to applaud those who were fighting a common enemy on our behalf. I was conscious of the contrast between ourselves hiding away to avoid contact with Covid-19 and their exposure to it, often with insufficient protection and also the contrast between my reduced opportunity to work and their working to exhaustion. So, I applauded with incredible gratitude for many who I don't know and also felt I was receiving that gratitude from others on behalf of our Junior doctor son, working long shifts in Lancaster with Covid-19 patients.

Today is Palm Sunday when the Christian church remembers a day 2,000 years ago when the villagers around Jerusalem came out onto the streets to applaud the one they hoped would save them from a common enemy. Today, as we remember the experience of joining together to applaud those we couldn't see fighting an invisible enemy, that memory helps us get inside the experience of this other crowd cheering the one they could see who they wanted to fight a very visible enemy.

That enemy was, of course, the Roman army, the latest in a line of foreign invaders to oppress the Jewish nation. It was approximately 500 years since God's people had started to return from exile in Babylon with an expectation that God would restore the fortunes of Judah that they would become pre-eminent in that region, living in peace and prosperity. The prophet Daniel had predicted a that this new era, when the new King who would be God's anointed one to re-establish David's throne and reign in peace - would begin in a week of 70 years - i.e. 490 years. This time was now up and God's people were living in a sense of anticipation that the New Messiah would come soon - and, indeed there had already been several false hopes come and go.

Having spent three years trying to keep the reality that he was the Christ (the Messiah) quiet - Jesus chose to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey as a deliberate statement that he knew himself to be God's anointed one, coming to be the promised King in David's line. Everyone would have known the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 which sees the messianic King riding on the foal of a donkey - not only that - but this mirrored Solomon riding on David's mule to be declared King.

The power of the symbolism was not lost on the cheering crowd - all their actions and chants were welcoming the messianic King. "Hosanna, to the Son of David!" could be paraphrased as "here comes the new Davidic King who comes in the name of God to save us!"

I wonder if, in their hope and fervour they missed a key sign that would ultimately lead to their disappointment in Jesus. A King riding into battle would ride a horse - A King riding on a donkey was coming as a King of peace.

So what were the crowd expecting: Primarily they expected that the new Davidic king would unite the people of God into a massive rebellion against the Romans which would establish a new Kingdom of God's people - a people who would be self-governing and live in undisturbed peace for ever. So the first task for this King would be to unite the zealots, the artisans, the entrepreneurs, the Pharisees, the scribe and the priests together in this common cause.

However the first thing Jesus did when he arrived in Jerusalem was upset all the religious traders and leaders by cleansing the temple. Then, over the next few days he publicly ridiculed all the religious leaders – turning them even more against him.

Having failed to create the unity needed to establish the revolution necessary, Jesus finally confronts his enemies face to face – and promptly surrenders.

This is not the Messianic warrior King that the crowds thought they were welcoming into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. What were they to make of Jesus now? They felt they had two choices: either Jesus was yet another false Messiah or, even worse, he was the one sent by God and he had messed up and bottled out of the opportunity that they had been waiting for over those long 500 years. (If any of that crowd were really there on Good Friday shouting “crucify”, we can understand their anger and disappointment.)

There was, however a third possibility: that Jesus was the Messiah, but that God’s understanding of Messiah was both different to, and greater than, their expectation. It was the few who hung on to this third option who were able to continue to trust even through the dark days of Good Friday and Saturday. They realised that the fact that it felt as if God had completely lost control and that they couldn’t see any way forward, meant that God must be doing something different to, and greater than, anything they ever expected. On Easter Sunday morning they began to understand that the salvation and freedom won by Jesus on the cross was the greatest victory of all and that he is a Messiah far greater than anything they could have imagined.

Today, on this most unusual Palm Sunday, could I invite you to take a moment to think what expectations lie behind your cries of “Hosanna! – Save us!”? Is our Jesus locked inside our closed church buildings along with the box of palm crosses? Many of the trappings that help us live out our Christian lives have been temporarily suspended – no gathering together, no Communion (Not even at sunrise on Easter morning!), no Trinity Praise etc. We could just put our heads down, wait for this crisis to pass (which it will!) and then try and get back to how things were. Or we could join those disciples who, in spite of their distress and sadness, continued to trust that Jesus would do something different to and greater than their expectations.

The writer to the Hebrews wrote that “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see!” What we don’t see, but are sure of, is that Jesus is alive and is active in his church – you and me - currently dispersed to our homes. What he is doing in his church in 2020 is definitely different to what we expected at the beginning of this year. We may feel powerless in the face of the Covid-19 virus and weakened by our isolation, but let us embrace God’s promise to the Apostle Paul that “My strength is made perfect in weakness!” and ask for faith to see what he is doing in us; in his church; and in the world; which is different to, but so much greater than, our current expectations.