

As we look at the events of Palm Sunday & Good Friday-days of Triumph & Disaster for the Lord, I'm reminded of a couplet from Kipling's 'If..'

"If you can meet with triumph & disaster

And treat these two imposters just the same..."

Perhaps, in some ways that's what He did, though at a terrible cost, as shown by His Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. There was the apparent Triumph, when much of Jerusalem accepted Him as Messiah & King on Palm Sunday followed by the Disaster of His arrest, rigged trial, desertion by His followers & the terrible & unique separation from His Father. Of course, this was followed by the real Triumph of Easter-the Resurrection & Ascension back to glory.

Matthew's account of His entry into Jerusalem as Messiah & King echoes parts of the victory hymn of Ps. 118. This celebrated the return of the king, victorious through God's help. Verse 19 shows the procession to the Temple-verse 20 is the response of the Levites at the gate. The king gives thanks in verses 21-22, whereupon the chorus raises Hosannas 23-25, after which the priest blesses the king-"blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" 26 & to conclude everyone sings with joy about the procession 27-29. Similarly, Zechariah's prophecy (9: 9) contains details of the entry of a triumphant king sent by God, which explains the Lord's use of a donkey.

The Lord's entry has many important symbols, which, though recognized at the time, may seem strange to us. They tell of His character as a gracious King & of the peaceful nature of His Kingdom.

First, there is the ass-this was a sign of royal power & peace, whereas a horse was the mark of a military conqueror or a political revolutionary. In 1917, after the Ottomans in Palestine surrendered General Allenby, I think, entered Jerusalem on foot to make a somewhat similar point. The foal, on which no one had ridden before, hints that the rider was someone special, who was worth more than a second hand mount.

Second, there are the cloaks for Jesus to sit on instead of a saddle-is this a suggestion of the offering of believers to be used in His service? Then there the cloaks & branches (see Ps 118: 27) scattered over the road to give a special welcome to Him. Cloaks were a vital piece of clothing at the time & often people only had one, so they were not to be used rashly-in a way that might destroy them. The people's costly actions were the equivalent of laying out the red carpet for the Queen or her special guests on ceremonial occasions. It is a mark of respect to honour her.

Third, there are the shouts of Hosanna, which was, originally, a cry for God to save, though later it became form of praise & greeting. In the same way "Goodbye" is a contraction of "God be with you." These shouts make clear that many recognized that Jesus was the Messiah come as a deliverer. Sadly, too many assumed that He would deliver them from the Roman yoke, which was the heartfelt wish of many Jews at the time. The religious establishment, who had to work with the all powerful Romans were, naturally, very twitchy about any one or any event that might upset their way of collaborating with Pilate.

In fact, the Lord had come to deliver mankind from the penalty & grip of evil & rebellion against God rather than a conqueror of the Romans. When the crowds added Ps 118: 26 "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord", The Pharisees asked the Lord to silence them, but He refused, saying in Lk. 19: 39-40 that if the crowd was silent, the very stones would cry out. Thus, He accepted their recognition of Him as the Messiah, which ramped up the Pharisees' anxieties that the Romans would see this as a revolt & assault on their dominance as the occupying power. The Kingdom, however, which the Lord was ushering in, was not at all like that-it was to be one of peace, forgiveness & love, whose subjects would be those who trusted, obeyed & loved Him, so that He might transform them to become more & more Christlike.

Lastly, I do wonder whether the great rejoicing in Jerusalem about the Lord's coming as Messiah is a very pale reflection of the rejoicing

in Heaven, when the Lord returned to sit at the right hand of his Father after the Ascension. Perhaps, that is too fanciful, but the celebration in the first Palm Sunday should challenge us about our response to the Lord as our Messiah in whom we have trusted. Do we show such joy & energy? I ask this of myself as much as of anyone else.

Or to put it another way-do we give Him the red carpet treatment that his followers did on the first Palm Sunday & which He so richly deserves? Do we honour & respect Him? Indeed, do we, as it were, give him our prized cloaks to use-a willingness to give all in His service? He is our loving & faithful King, who gave His all for us at Calvary-the ruler of our lives & circumstances-our deliverer & friend.