

Palm Sunday 14 April 2019

St. Brandon's

Luke 19:28-40

Following dramatized passion reading...

Thank you for such a thoughtful and moving rendition of that reading. We will hold it in our minds and hearts as we reflect now on the events of Palm Sunday, the first act of the drama that is Holy Week, which we walk through and live through in this coming week. I want to begin by asking, *What strikes you most, on this Palm Sunday?*

Some time ago in a church in Newmarket, there was a young jockey who, on hearing the Palm gospel which we read at the start of today's service, became quite distracted and didn't seem to pay attention to anything else which followed. But as soon as the service ended, he turned to his friends and said,

Did you hear what that guy read? That Jesus was some rider! Fancy getting on a young animal that had never been broken in, and then riding it through all that noise and kerfuffle, people waving palm branches and shouting in its ears. I'd like to know more about him!

We all come to the gospel account from our own starting point, which may not be the same as last year. Certainly for Nick and me it is very new and fresh as we join a new Christian community in a new setting.

I must say it was wonderful to read the Palm Gospel in the open air at the crossroads, and to be part of the procession down to church with the cross. It gave me a sense of what it might have been like to be there ...

Geoff, Fiona and I had done a bit of advance planning for this morning, but on Palm Sunday it was far more dramatic- the secret arrangement, the disciples going on ahead to fetch the colt, the mysterious message which would unlock the plan:

'The Lord needs it.'

Walking together even for a short distance today connected me with the crowds, of people just like us, who came out to see Jesus for themselves, and then followed him along the Jerusalem road.

I was reminded once more of the beauty of the landscape as Jesus rode down from the Mount of Olives to the great city, its houses, palaces, streets and markets spread out ahead of them. The whole skyline is dominated by Herod the Great's huge temple, many times bigger than our cathedrals- and topped with a vast dome covered in gold, catching the sun from each angle through the day...

It's a colourful, busy, noisy, exciting scene, and then everything comes together as the crowd begins to shout, and it becomes a chant in unison:

Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!

The sound must have echoed across the valley as Jesus rode past. In the other gospels we read another phrase which the crowd chanted:

Hosanna to the Son of David!

We've already sung 'Hosanna!' this morning, and we'll proclaim it again in the Eucharistic prayer during Communion.

And that word 'Hosanna' in Hebrew means *Come and save us!*

It's from Psalm 118, which was always recited at the Feast of Passover, soon to be celebrated in Jerusalem.

As you'll see from your readings sheet, Psalm 118 speaks of the King, as a righteous one coming to the gates of the city.

To shout '*Hosanna*' was far more than just cheering on a hero, true as that was: it was a clear claim that Jesus was the Messiah, the long-promised King, Saviour and true 'Son of David', greatest of all Kings.

And many of those there would have known that just two verses later in Psalm 118 it says that the promised leader will be like a stone which people reject, but which God raises on high.

In this emotive word *Hosanna* is both the promise of the **King**, and the prospect of rejection...

Well on that first Palm Sunday, Jesus' arrival and the crowds' response cause uproar- and the Pharisees, who are the most alarmed of all, tell Jesus that he should order his disciples to stop...

If they did, the very stones would cry out, replies Jesus.

Jerusalem itself, the great city, his city, would recognise him as Messiah, coming to save God's people.

And how astonishing that this simple northern preacher who died a criminal's death almost 2000 years ago, still provokes reaction and controversy, still *matters* to people, like that jockey we heard about earlier.

An old friend was with us on Wednesday evening; we studied English together many years ago in York. And she brought me a gift- a new book (signed, no less) by Richard Harries, former Bishop of Oxford, entitled 'Haunted by Christ' in which he makes a case for the presence and influence of Jesus Christ in modern culture and literature, rebuffing claims of the dominance of secularism. I'm looking forward to reading it.

I note too that yesterday afternoon that Radio 4 devoted a wonderful hour to part 1 of *Luke-Acts*, a drama adapted from the Bible texts by Michael Symmons Roberts, with another hour to come today – do listen if you can.

(I think I'll go back and listen again as I was slightly preoccupied with hemming curtains at the time!)

The BBC describes this drama in its listings as

'one of the founding stories of our culture and world history',
in a gloriously British understatement....

Harries is right- we are still haunted by Christ.

And so we should be.

Of that motley and jubilant crowd who welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday, many will have seen him again in Jerusalem through the course of the week.

Some, in the temple courts as he entered and angrily expelled the traders there, referring to 'My Father's house' which should be a house of prayer but had become a den of robbers.

Or they might have been in the courtyard after news of his arrest. Waiting to catch a glimpse of the prisoner, as journalists still do today outside courts.

They may have shouted at Pilate *for* his execution,

or remained bravely and sadly silent at the release of the murderer Barabbas, while Jesus was taken to the cross.

Our dramatized reading gave us all the opportunity to experience a little of what that crowd may have felt like...

How many, I wonder, stood along the road out of the city to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, saw him walk, stumble, fall, along the way?

And how many read the sign above his head, *King of the Jews?*

We too will trace this week's journey in the coming days.

And as we make our journey let us remember that cry of *Hosanna!* and all it signifies, and let us determine not to keep silent, but to welcome Jesus,

the blessed one who comes in the name of the Lord

and who comes to be our King and our Saviour.

Come and join in the evening services this Holy Week –

take the opportunity for shared reflection and prayer, as well as for personal contemplation, maybe helped by that broadcast I mentioned just now.

Let us this week be willingly *haunted by Christ* in all we do, aware of the great story which lies now just at the foundation of our culture and world history, but at the heart of our personal and communal identity, purpose and salvation.

May others around us see that Easter isn't only about chocolate or bunnies or chicks,
much as we can endorse the theme of new life,
but that this great story is far deeper, richer and transforming,
the story of Christ who lived, suffered, died and rose again,
who broke the power of sin and death
for all time and all people,
and still brings forgiveness, new life and hope,
wherever we stand in the story today,
now and for ever.

Amen.

.