

Palm Sunday (A)

Excitement

Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Preparing for today I recalled Palm Sundays past: processions, cutting branches, making palm crosses, waving palms, shouting “Hosanna.” The excitement the Jerusalem crowd felt somehow crosses the centuries and grabs me every year.

Then there are the various liturgies we share in as the week unfolds – the Last Supper and foot washing on Maundy Thursday; the quiet refecton and solemnity of Good Friday; lighting the Great Vigil and New Fire on Easter Eve. And then the excitement of Easter morning: the countless alleluias and the renewal of our baptismal promises.

I wonder if that’s what Matthew intended – to draw us into that excitement, to place us among the crowd, shouting and celebrating.

In Jerusalem there was expectation in the air. The crowd is joyful, enthusiastic, and full of hope as they shout their “hosannas.” Cloaks are spread on the dusty road, paving Jesus’ path. It’s an extravagant gesture –especially if that cloak is your only one. Those who do this are saying: “Here’s the best we can offer to the one who will fulfil our hopes and longings. We give him our loyalty.”

They’re reliving a moment from their people’s history – a time when a new and triumphant king entered the city. Now they re-enact that event as Jesus enters Jerusalem.

Perhaps the sight of garments on the road heightens the sense of expectancy. Rumours ripple through the crowd. Something is happening! Is this the long-awaited king who will rid us of Roman oppression? As excitement builds, people wave tree branches and spread them on the road like a red carpet, shouting:

“Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Less than two centuries earlier, Judas Maccabaeus – the great Jewish freedom fighter – had entered Jerusalem after defeating pagan armies, and the people had welcomed him in the same way: waving branches. Judas founded a royal dynasty that ruled for over a century. And then there’s the title given to Jesus: “Son of David.” It couldn’t be more explicit. Jerusalem was the city of Israel’s greatest king, and for a thousand years the people had waited for his successor.

The word spreads: “Here’s David’s heir, the nation’s saviour.” And the shout goes up: “Hosanna!” They know exactly what the word means: “Save us, O Lord – help us now.” It’s the same cry we hear in today’s psalm: “Save us, O Lord, we pray.” And it’s still the cry we offer to the one who is our saviour, our liberator, the fulfilment of our deepest hopes.

We know how the story ends, and how within days the mood of the crowd will change. “*Hosanna*” will be replaced by “*Crucify*.” We know that the one who comes in the name of the Lord will be rejected and humiliated. But for the moment, let’s set that knowledge aside and remain with the crowd. Let’s welcome Jesus with our hopes and longings. Let’s lay before him our loyalty and homage. Like the people then, we need to hope and dream, to allow ourselves to yearn for one who will save and help. And yes – we’re allowed to be excited and expectant.

Of course, in all this welcoming, in all these hopes and cries for help, there's a mixture of motives. The crowd saw in Jesus a political and military leader – someone who would deal with the Romans and cleanse a corrupt religious system. But he wasn't another King David or Judas Maccabaeus. He hears the people's cries, and he will answer them – but in his own way.

Like the crowd then, we're faced with a Jesus who doesn't always meet our expectations or fit our agendas. He doesn't tick all our boxes. He didn't do so for Jerusalem, and he doesn't do so for us. And that is often where rejection begins. The people struggled to accept a king whose throne was a cross.

Writing to the Philippians, Paul describes Jesus as fully divine, yet one who emptied himself and took the form of a slave, who humbled himself, even to death. It's the same paradox the disciples encountered at the Last Supper, when Jesus took on the role of a household servant and washed their dirty, smelly feet.

At our baptism we made promises – promises we will renew next Sunday. They summarise the life we're called to live and remind us of who Jesus is:

- I will forgive others as I am forgiven;
- I will seek to love my neighbour as myself, and strive for peace and justice;
- I will accept the cost of following Jesus Christ in my daily life and work;
- And with the whole Church, I will proclaim by word and action the Good News of God in Christ.

As we welcome Jesus today, let's remember that this is what he's about –and this is what we are called to do. This is what our palm cross will remind us of in the year ahead.

Today is a joyful day. It's also a challenging one.

As we welcome Jesus, may we invite him to shape our lives through his servanthood and suffering, through his love and forgiveness. We're called to share in his work. So, I wonder: how will that shape our lives on Monday morning?

Gracious God,
you come to us not in power,
but in humility and love.
As we welcome Jesus,
teach us to walk his way –
the way of the cross that leads to life.
May our words, our choices, and our lives
proclaim him as Lord. Amen.

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