

Palm Sunday 2021 **A strange sort of Triumph**

Carolyn talked last Sunday of paradoxes - surely there is none greater than Jesus riding into Jerusalem, the mythical capital city, in a realization of the Old Testament prophesy of the King entering Jerusalem on a donkey, welcomed by crowds of supporters ... only to be crucified within a week?

What sort of a triumph was that? If it was a triumph it was strange indeed ... And yet, having heard this story over and over, we know it was a triumph, that by dying on the cross Jesus came to save us from our sins... a mantra we repeat and accept but partially understand at best...

But this morning my question is: "what does this mean to me, as I sit alone in front of my screens in my home office... ?"

"What do Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the symbolism, the cheering crowds mean to us after a year of pandemic?"

Well, I think we all recognize the paradox. As I talked about for the transfiguration, we see clearly in the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem that the triumph was other than people first saw. It is easier to focus on the triumphal entry into Jerusalem – when Jesus' triumph came not from the show, not from the fireworks, but from His death on the cross.

This is nothing new. People wanted healing miracles, and these tend to obscure the more difficult message of change, new creation, love, that Jesus brought. Jesus' triumph was other than what people wanted – listen to the words of our final song this morning, which captures that tension between humility and royalty, between triumph and death.

Maybe that disappointment - that realization that all was not going to be easy – maybe that explained the people's sudden change of tone from "Hosanna! – save me!" To "Crucify him!"

Maybe people were blinded by their own need to be freed from the Roman oppressor and the recognition that was the this realization of the prophecy of the King coming. They shouted Hosanna! Which is variously translated as "Lord save me!" or "Save me now!". The people wanted saving from the situation in which they found themselves, maybe a bit like us. They recognized the realization of the Old Testament prophecies and expected an easy way out.

It's been a long time since I told a joke during a reflection ... do you know the one about the man who falls off a cliff, and as he is falling is able to grab a branch. He shouts for help as he clings on desperately: "HELP ... is there anyone there? HELP! I can't hold on much longer!" And a voice responds "My son, I am here."

"Who is this?"

"I am Jesus, and I have come to save you. Let go, and I will catch you."

... There is a pause ... the wind blows ... and then the man says, in a little voice

"is there anyone else there?"

But I should return to my question - what does that mean to me? Because I think actually that there is a very real danger that I fall into the comfortable trap of thinking about why the first century inhabitants of Jerusalem got it wrong. How the man in the joke didn't want that kind of a triumph either.

Our pandemic isolation makes a bit of introspection all the more appropriate. Maybe it makes it inevitable. As an invitation to this introspection, Malcolm Guite says "there is a Jerusalem of the heart". He invites us to connect the truth of the "then and there" ... to the more awkward truth of the "here and now".

Think for a moment of the Jerusalem of your heart, into which the King comes riding today. Do you not welcome him with cries of Hosanna! Glory to the King! Hosanna ! Save me!

Especially as those around you are all shouting the same thing ... everyone is caught up in the heat of the moment ... You probably wouldn't be here if we weren't waiting for the saviour to ride in, or at least if you weren't wondering what the crowd was gathering for.

But what next? Are we like the grain that falls on shallow ground? Sprouting enthusiastically at first but then drying up in the hot sun for lack of root? Enthusiastically shouting Hosanna one moment but then swept up by more urgent matters the next? Forced to choose between The Way and the hard demands of daily life?

Forgive me ... this is going to sound harsh. Might we respond like the crowds in Jerusalem? All enthusiastic one minute, but losing interest if the show doesn't deliver? Doesn't deliver what we want? When we choose busy-ness over Jesus ... is that how we shout "crucify" in our hearts ? Just like the people of Jerusalem did when the saviour they imagined didn't perform as they wanted him to?

It sounds really harsh - but I ask that not to condemn, but as a challenge. We know the story, we know that this next week Jesus will walk deliberately towards his betrayal and his execution, we know that on the way he will be flogged, he will fall under the weight of the cross he is forced to carry ... we know that he died for our sins. Willingly. And we feel the paradox of that triumph.

But if Jesus wanted to keep his miracles from distracting people (as I suggested in my reflection on the transfiguration) because he knew how distracting fireworks can be, if Jesus knew that Judas would betray him, if he knew as he entered Jerusalem that he would be crucified ... why did He go along with it? He did it for love of those very people who would aid and abet, even for love of those who would kill him.

Why is it any different today? In the Jerusalem of my heart ? Jesus knows who I am, and yet he rides in willingly.

As Jesus comes into our hearts and as we cry Hosanna! ... He knows the risks he runs and we run. He knows all the other things we have to cope with, all our doubts and fears. He knows we'd like the easy way out. And he wants to help us with all these challenges, nay he wants

to free us from them. That is why, despite what we and everyone else in this world might think is sensible ... he keeps doing it, year after year, day after day.

And that is why we are called not only to welcome Him on Palm Sunday but to join Him. We shout Hosanna! Save me! enthusiastically ... but we know that this moment of excitement comes with the challenge not to end up shouting "Crucify!" ... not to shout Crucify! By turning back to our distractions and busy-ness but to pick up our cross. To die to what we think is important but which is actually separating us from God ... so that we can live life.

The good news is that in His love Jesus rides into the Jerusalem of our hearts again and again, he comes to us over and over ... I pray that of all the unlikely positive things to come out of this pandemic, we might be more aware of Jesus riding into our hearts, and might better respond to Him and to His love.

Amen