

Sermon for Online Service: Pott Shrigley 5 April 2020

Matthew 21.1-11 *Palm Sunday*

Palm Sunday: what pictures come to mind?

Well, for many, the first thought will surely be of Palm Trees, or at least their branches and leaves. As we heard in the reading, Jesus followers and fans waved these great leaves like flags, and threw them down onto the road in his path, like a carpet.

The palm was a symbol of royalty, and these people were, quite noisily and openly, proclaiming Jesus as their king; not a very sensible thing to do, you might think, under the watchful gaze of the occupying Romans, who ruled with an iron fist.

Or maybe you think of the donkey. Over the years I have had a few Palm Sunday services where a real life donkey – usually, but not always, kept in the churchyard outside – was part of the proceedings. Whereas in the Christmas story there is no mention of a donkey, on this day the Bible makes a point of describing, not only the beast on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem, but even the means by which his disciples acquired it. As the writer, Matthew, comments,

This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet: ‘Say to Zion, “See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”’

So, even by riding this apparently humble beast Jesus is making a startling claim: The crowds are right; that king, for whom you have long been waiting, whom the prophet’s foretold; I am he. Perhaps the watching Romans would not pick up on this: but the High Priest and his cronies certainly would – and they, too, were powerful people whom you would be unwise to antagonise.

But, as we read this familiar story once again, one other image comes to mind – although it is not once mentioned. Looming like a large black cloud over the whole scene, in our minds, and, I am sure, in Jesus’ mind too, is the cross.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, he already knew that it was not to take up an earthly throne; however hard the crowds shouted ‘Hosanna to the Son, the descendant, of the great King David!’. Jesus knew, as we will remember on Friday, that the only place he would be enthroned was on that terrible execution machine, the most extreme expression of the Romans’ iron fist – the Cross.

I wonder if the crowds’ adulation already rang hollow in his ears, as he contemplated what lay ahead. He knew also, perhaps, that, in the coming days, some in the crowd would fall away, would turn on him, would shout equally loudly for his tortuous death.

Surely, as human as we are, the long shadow cast by the cross played on Jesus’ mind, even as he received and acknowledged the joy, love and worship of the crowd. And you don’t need me to remind you that we, too, are living under a dark cloud, a long shadow - cast by the coronavirus. Even as we sing our songs of praise today, concern for what is ahead of us, and, indeed, all around us, will not be far from *our* minds.

But if Jesus could see the cross bearing down on him, he could also glimpse past it, even as you might just glimpse White Nancy behind me here, at the victory of the resurrection, which would follow. It’s that victory which, if it does not dispel the shadow, robs it of its power.

Holy Week is a time for remembering, re-telling, re-hearing the terrible, amazing story of the cross. My prayer is that our current experience will help us to appreciate that story more deeply, and to find in it new meaning, and a new hope and faith in him. For as those same prophets also wrote:

‘Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering’.