

# Homily for People and Parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2024, Palm Sunday

Readings: Exodus 13:1-3, 7-9  
Galatians 3:10-14

Psalm 70  
Mark 11:1-11

Well, here we are! The journey of Lent is over! It's Palm Sunday, and the beginning of Holy Week! Anglican congregations in many parts of Australia, and in many parts of the world, will process outside the church on this day while waving palm branches. The hymn I usually associate with Palm Sunday processions has the refrain, *"All glory, praise and honour to thee redeemer, king; to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring..."* and on many occasions I have heard the hymn become a bit like a Mexican wave with those at the front of the procession singing several beats ahead of those at the end!

There is something that feels different about beginning a time of worship in this way. We are outside a building without an organ to guide our singing. We may juggle hymn books and palm fronds and keep an eye out for those who are elderly, or for children who seek to duck off and play somewhere. But, at some stage people will be guided back into the church, leaving palm fronds in an orderly pile at the door. People will file into pews, gratefully accepting the leadership of an organ before a priest welcomes, and they are again back in the comfort zone of Sunday worship.

Strangely, the Gospel set for the day is not the entry into Jerusalem, but rather a reading of the Passion. It's almost as though the compilers of the Lectionary do not think we will make time to participate in the services of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday this week or have opportunity to do so. As though we will miss the gift of foot-washing, and the last supper; the new commandment and the prayer in the garden; the betrayal of Judas, the trial of Jesus; the scourging; the denial; and the death of someone we call 'Son of God'.

There are many uncomfortable questions to explore, and they include:

- Why did the people who called out 'Hosanna!' at the beginning of the week, call out, 'Crucify him!' a few days later?
- Why did those people get excited about Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem?
- What expectations did they have of him? and,
- Why were they so disappointed and angry?

In considering these questions it is important to have some sense of the context in which these events took place. The people of Israel believed that they were chosen and favored by God and remembered nostalgically a time when they had been a powerful nation under the leadership of King David, and then his son Solomon. Over many centuries since that golden age, they had known defeat in battle, exile in Babylon, and occupation. Palestine

was a small and relatively unimportant part of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus, and there was an ongoing and much resented Roman occupation. However, long before Jesus lived some Jewish prophets, notably the prophet Isaiah, anticipated a time when God would send a new king who would make Israel great again.

For three years Jesus had been teaching and preaching with an authority that seemed to come from God. Like the Jewish prophets of old he challenged injustice and worked miracles. Indeed, some miracles were so extraordinary that they had never been seen before. Consequently, people wondered if Jesus was that longed for and promised king, that the prophets had foretold. They began to hope that their occupation might be coming to an end, and that Israel would become great again.

One thousand years before Jesus, when king David rode into Jerusalem on a horse it gave a message to the people of the city, that Israel was at war. But, when victory had been achieved, and there would be future peace, David would ride a donkey.

So... when Jesus chose to ride a donkey into Jerusalem on that fateful day there was powerful symbolism that was communally understood. Jesus was acclaimed by the crowd as a king, in the footsteps of David, and he came with the promise of a future peace..

The crowds waving palm branches and throwing their cloaks on the ground were not greeting a celebrity who had entertained them, they were greeting someone who gave them hope. Hope that their captivity would be coming to an end, and that a new beginning had arrived.

I wonder if the crowds expected Jesus to go to the corrupt Jewish king Herod, and explain to him that his reign was over; or, if they expected him to go the Roman administrator, Pontius Pilate, and tell him that his time was up? We can only imagine and hypothesize... we can never know.

What we do know is that instead of going to challenge the secular authority of Herod or Pilate, Jesus went instead to the Jewish Temple to pray.

What happened next is well known: Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers, drove out the animals with a whip, and accused the religious authorities that they had turned a place of worship into a market. That they had transformed a place of encounter with God, into an opportunity to make money...

What conversations there must have been in the city of Jerusalem that night? Who was this guy? And, why did he get so cranky in the Temple?

It does seem that for the Jewish authorities this was a turning point. They could cope with an itinerant Rabbi critiquing them from a distance, but here he was denouncing them in the heart of the holy city. His demonstrated authority and popularity with 'the crowd' threatened the status quo, and the decision was made by them for his life to be ended. The decision was made that false charges against Jesus would be presented to the Roman authorities in a way that would result in his execution.

It would have been much easier for Jesus to not go to Jerusalem. The chances are that he would have lived a longer life and possibly died of old age rather than crucifixion. However, he chose to go to the heart of a compromised and unjust institution that claimed to speak on behalf of God... and speak truth.

It did not go well for him, as it too often does for those who feel compelled to do this. But, because he made that choice, we believe a cosmological difference was made possible: that death need not be the end of the story; that light can come out darkness; and that there can always be reason to hope.

So, where do you and I imagine ourselves being in this story? Are we cheering 'Hosanna!' with the crowd... full of ill-informed expectations? Or, are we steadfast with Christ, speaking truth to power... even when this is costly?

Let's pray...

Gracious God, we give thanks for the courage of Jesus to challenge what was unjust and self-interested in the religion of his time. In your mercy, we ask for the wisdom and courage to challenge our own self-interest so that your Spirit can bring transformation, and new life. We pray in the name of the one who chose to ride a donkey, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.