

Palm Sunday – a Reflection on Matthew 21.1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’ This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

Palm Sunday - the beginning of Holy Week, a very different Holy Week this year! No blessing of palm crosses in church, no worship together, no procession at the end of the service. This year, each of us must journey physically separated from our communities, yet we are still united in spirit.

As we read these words, let's reflect on where we are in this story. Are we part of the crowd? Are we with Jesus and the disciples? Or are we bystanders, watching what is unfolding before us? This story is often headed *Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem* and this is certainly Matthew's focus. There's a royal dimension to his account. He is at pains to tell us that the prophecy of Zechariah is being fulfilled. Jesus is acclaimed as the long awaited Messiah who will save Israel from the oppressor.

And Jesus? He knows what awaits him in the city. He has made it clear to his disciples; but they have found it almost impossible to understand. He has also made it clear that his kingdom is totally different from the one the people were expecting. God's kingdom is one where the first will be last and the servants of all; where no one is excluded; where love, mercy, justice and peace reign.

Jesus is also very much in control of events here. Notice how he instructs the two disciples with direct commands: go, untie the donkey and colt, bring them to me, tell anyone who questions you, the Lord needs them. They did exactly what Jesus had directed. But imagine we could eavesdrop on their conversation as they headed off. They must have been anxious since Jesus had told them he would be betrayed and would die. Did they share their fears as they approached Jerusalem? They must have wondered what was going on. Were they perplexed by these instructions? Yet they carried them out to the letter. They trusted Jesus.

They return and place their cloaks on the donkey and the colt. What motivates the crowds as they acclaim Jesus with symbols appropriate for a king as he rides into the city? What are they seeking? A quick answer to their prayers for deliverance from an oppressive regime? Are they at this point being swayed by the mood of those around them? It's so easy to go with the flow. With the benefit of hindsight we know this will change very soon; they will soon be demanding the death of Jesus.

So where are we in this story as we begin a very different Holy Week? We are living in uncertain times; life has changed in a way that we could not possibly have imagined a few weeks ago; many are fearful for themselves, for family and friends they can no longer visit; many are lonely and finding it difficult to get the things they need urgently; many are grieving the loss of loved ones.

As we walk with Jesus this coming week and reflect on his pain and suffering, let us remember that Jesus is walking with us in our situation. The disciples trusted Jesus and did exactly what he told them to do, even though they probably didn't understand. Let us too trust in Jesus who shows us the way, who is the light that shines in the darkness, and that light cannot be extinguished.

Prayer for Palm Sunday

True and humble king,
hailed by the crowd as Messiah:
grant us the faith to know you and love you,
that we may be found beside you
on the way of the cross,
which is the path of glory.
Amen.