

Worship for Palm Sunday: 10th April 2022

Call to worship

Not in the quiet stillness of church, but by the roadside, noisy crowds gathered to welcome Jesus.

Not in their seats, but on their feet, they stood and cheered.

*Not because they had to, but because they wanted to, more than anything, that morning, they assembled and waved and called out and proclaimed: **Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.***

*As we worship, may the jubilation of the crowd nestle in our hearts, and may our reverence and love for Jesus grow there, that we too might proclaim, "**Blessed is he....**"*

Hymn 364: All glory, laud, and honour

*All glory, laud, and honour,
to you, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring!*

1 You are the King of Israel,
great David's royal Son,
now in the Lord's name coming,
the King and Blessèd One.

*All glory, laud, and honour,
to you, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring!*

2 The company of angels
is praising you on high,
while we and all creation
together make reply.

*All glory, laud, and honour,
to you, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring!*

3 The people of the Hebrews
with palms before you went;
our praise and prayer and anthems
before you we present.

*All glory, laud, and honour,
to you, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring!*

4 To you before your Passion
they sang their hymns of praise;
to you, now high exalted,
our melody we raise.

*All glory, laud, and honour,
to you, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring!*

5 Their praises you accepted;
accept the prayers we bring,
in every good delighting,
our great and gracious King:

*All glory, laud, and honour,
to you, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring!*

Prayer

We sing, on this Palm Sunday, "All glory, laud and honour", and it's good to sing it, a stately, familiar tune. We like "stately" and "familiar" because they don't ask too much of us. But oh, Lord God, you have much to ask of us this day, and we, perhaps, undoubtedly, have something to give. And so we offer praise, adoration and thanksgiving, and above all, we worship you, for this is Palm Sunday and Jesus is coming, slowly, surely, riding into our midst.

Almighty God, this is the beginning of the week that changed everything. Some fell away, dispersing with the crowd when the newness and novelty died down. Some persisted, only to find their nerve failing later. But some, a few, hung in and hung on to the end. May we be among them. Let us find will and confidence and courage and humility to walk the whole way, to accompany Jesus into temple and family home and upper room and judgment hall, and then all the way to the cross. If only... If only...

And yet, Lord God, you will not desert us. Wherever and however and with whomsoever we go, you will go with us. You will deal mercifully with our shortcomings and small-mindedness, you will forgive our sins and continue with us when we grind to a halt or settle down by the wayside to rest. Whatever we do, you will be there.

And so, at the beginning of this Holy Week, knowing you are utterly dependable, we set out. Not only on this formal worship day, but every day, give us time and space to worship you, to submit and seek in prayer, to follow up with kindness and concern, to watch and wait at every place where Jesus stops. Nothing was too much for him and he continued all the way to the cross. Help us to walk a little of the way, for only if we reach the cross will we know the glory of the resurrection.

Amen.

Reading: Luke 19 verses 28 - 40

Hymn 368: Shout, "Hosanna, welcome to Jesus the king!"

1 Shout, 'Hosanna, welcome to Jesus the King!

Welcome to Jerusalem!

*God bless him who comes in the **name of the Lord.**'

Wave palm branches and be a disciple.

He is coming to save his people.

Shout, 'Hosanna, welcome to Jesus our King!'

2 Line the roadside, welcome the Son of our God!

Welcome to Jerusalem!

*Make a pathway, welcome him **into your heart!**

Wave palm branches and be a disciple.

He is coming to save his people.

Sing his praises, welcome the Son of our God!

* *The last four syllables of these lines in each verse are repeated.*

Luke 19 verse 37b: ... the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices.....: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Until about two years ago, crowds were mostly quite safe places. We didn't think twice – those of us with strong moral or political views – about joining marches or demonstrations (though maybe not so many here in Westerton). I still remember that amazing anti-Iraq war protest in which I took part in Glasgow, along with hundreds of thousands of others, though of course our political masters, not always lovers of democracy, paid scant attention. Others participate often in events planned to signal dismay and disgust at the presence of nuclear weapons twenty-five miles down the road.... Suddenly a bit more dangerous, aren't they? Occasionally, before Covid 19 came ravaging, I used to join the home fans on the terraces at Firhill, and always felt completely safe. But last week, at Ibrox Stadium, out of the crowd came a glass bottle, which struck a member of the Celtic backroom staff on the head, causing serious injury. And at half time, Jo Hart, the Celtic goalkeeper, found his goal area strewn with broken glass. Perhaps those who did these dangerous, profoundly stupid things thought there was safety in a crowd. By now they'll know Police Scotland has other ideas.

Sometimes a crowd *is* a place of safety: there's safety in numbers, anonymity, a place to hide. People who are too gutless to stand up alone and make their point shelter behind others and take no real risk. If you are unlucky enough to live in a totalitarian regime (too many to mention), even being in a crowd offers no protection as police or the army move in to do violence and make arrests. Unless we're in one, we may not think too much about them, but on this Sunday – Palm Sunday – scripture directs our gaze exactly there: to a crowd lining the street on the way to Jerusalem.

Biblical commentators Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book *The Last Week*, have as their opening chapter (not surprisingly), Palm Sunday. In it, they tell the reader that two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. One they describe as a peasant procession, the other, imperial. Instead, perhaps, of the usual question: would we be in the crowd, waving, cheering, lauding Jesus, this one might be posed: which crowd would we be in. Let's consider this latter, less familiar one, first. Borg and Crossan (I recommend them: they are lucid and commanding writers) offer a word picture of cavalry on horses, marching soldiers, armour made of leather, helmets, weapons, banners, poles held aloft with golden eagles thereon, and "sun glinting on metal and gold". And drums being banged, horses' hooves clattering on the ground, and marching feet. Impressive, if you like that kind of thing. At its head was Pontius Pilate. Keep him in mind. He'll become very important as the week reaches its climax. Borg and Crossan write about: "The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful". Would that have been the crowd for us? Siding with the authorities, keeping out of trouble, blending in so easily as part of the establishment, however uncomfortable it sometimes became, and whatever moral compromises it demanded?

The other crowd, the one we read about every year, came from the east, and Jesus was at its head, coming down the Mount of Olives on a donkey: Jesus from a peasant

village, his followers mostly from the peasant class, and his ride, not a glossy black imperial stallion, but a donkey which he had sent one of his followers to take from the place where it was tied, without so much as a by your leave. It was the end of a hundred-mile journey from Galilee in the north, and a crowd had gathered in welcome, ordinary people, cheering, roused, and getting a bit carried away. If the procession coming from the west had seen them, they might have viewed them with disdain. Indeed, some Pharisees in this second crowd – why were they there, I wonder – told Jesus: **Teacher, rebuke your disciples.**

The rebuke had been earned because Jesus' followers had shouted this: **Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! And Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.** The first line is straight out of Psalm 118. According to Luke, Jesus will quote this same psalm again in the next chapter when he tells them the story of the tenants in the vineyard. The second will surely evoke memories of the Christmas story and the song of the angels to shepherds in the fields: **Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.** Perhaps Luke wants us to know Jesus has come almost full circle, though not quite. And this time, the peace is in heaven....

Whether on earth or heaven, this cry from the raucous crowd earns Jesus an invitation from the Pharisees to give them a telling off. In response, Jesus has something very strange indeed to say. **I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.** And that was precisely the problem: when push came to shove, Jesus' disciples *did* keep quiet. Yet the remarkable thing is, I think, that Jesus obviously has faith that somehow, his death, which he knows is looming, will not silence his memory, his love, or his power.

Holy Week is looming, starting today, and we are part of a crowd. Maybe you are in the establishment one: predictable, hidden, secure in your anonymity, going with the flow, not raising your head above the parapet for fear of standing out. Perhaps that's what you prefer: to blend in, to play safe, not to get too excited, not daring to speak up. Or maybe you've thrown caution to the winds, taken your life in your hands, joined the crowd coming in from the east. Maybe you hear your voice raised with others: **Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.** You know your scriptures, are informed about your faith, see Jesus as the fulfilment of something majestic, wonderful, long awaited, and know that the coming into town on the back of a donkey brings vividly to life the prediction of the prophet Zechariah. And you don't care, really, what any pompous religious person, Pharisee or not, tells you. **Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!** You just can't help yourself.

Not for now, anyway. Not for the moment. It's fine for now because it looks as if Jesus is on the ascendency, his star rising (another Christmas story echo... did you notice??), his popularity soaring. When you overhear him reply to the Pharisees who want him to tell you to keep the noise down: **I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out,** you feel utterly certain in your heart that the stones will never need to talk.

But if this is the crowd you are in, you'd better know it's the dangerous one, volatile and ultimately utterly frail. To put it bluntly - and often I do, as you know - the establishment crowd is the easy one, the safe one, and usually the preferred one for the wealthy, the privileged, and those who know they have a lot to lose. Maybe think twice before you leave the safety of it for the one that's cut the branches from the tress and strewn them at people's feet. But if you do, if you have the courage and the guts (and that's by no means a given), remember: you're joining the dangerous crowd. In the week that is coming, Jesus will do terrible things. If we follow the sequence here in Luke's gospel, we'll see him come swinging into the sanctuary and know immediately that he is furious, absolutely furious, to see what we've made of it. Then he'll give us a couple of choice takes on giving: about paying taxes and what you put in the offering plate. Also on his agenda are some very scary words for those who are married, before it all culminates with words clustered together in our version of scripture under the heading: **The destruction of the temple and signs of the end times.** And we've not even got to Thursday yet.

So here's a question: where will *you* be on Thursday: here, part of an apparently douce crowd (I hope "crowd" won't be an exaggeration), a crowd nevertheless, that quietly but certainly has the potential to be utterly subversive, or tucked in in front of the telly? Perhaps some of us will bypass the whole thing - Easter's a holiday, after all, is it not? - and turn up in a fortnight as if nothing's happened - which, for some, may well be the case.

I hope it will be otherwise, for all our sakes. Maybe some of us just can't take the frisson of excitement, the edginess of involvement in something radical, the riskiness of this way of life of following Jesus. If that's the case, maybe better bail out now and save yourself the bother, the messiness, the violence of the week that is coming. Maybe your seat round the table on Thursday will already have been vacated.

But if you can persevere, take your life in your hands, and then come and hold them out for bread and wine, and then walk a little further, all the way to the cross, and see someone else's hands, indeed arms, held, stretched out to the uttermost, then the stones will have no need to speak. Your yourself will have spoken, loud and clear, even if you haven't actually opened your mouth. You have already rehearsed it: **Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.** Then you can let the boring old establishment take care of itself.

Hymn 277: Hark the glad sound! the Saviour comes

1 Hark the glad sound! the Saviour comes,
the Saviour promised long;
let every heart exult with joy,
and every voice with song!

2 He comes, the prisoners to relieve,
in Satan's bondage held;
the gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield.

3 He comes the broken hearts to bind,
the bleeding souls to cure ;
and with the treasures of his grace
to enrich the humble poor.

4 The sacred year has now revolved,
accepted of the Lord,
when heaven's high promise is fulfilled,
and Israel is restored.

Scottish Paraphrases, 1781
St Luke 4: 18, 19

5 Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
thy welcome shall proclaim ;
and heaven's exalted arches ring
with thy most honoured name.

Offering

Dedication and prayers for others

Lord Jesus, you are readying yourself to give your all, not out of compulsion but out of love. May it be that all we do is out of love, too: all our giving, all our serving, all our acts of kindness, and all our work in the church and in the community. We dedicate these offerings, and all we have to give in every sphere of life, asking you to bless us in giving and receiving.

Lord God, be with all those who wait in the week ahead: those who wait with Jesus each day in Holy Week, and those who wait for the church to show its care. Let us rise to the challenge set before us to be Christ's ambassadors, that even in us his compassion may be demonstrated and his peace lived. Give patience to those who wait in hospitals, or on waiting lists, for diagnosis, and be with those who wait in hospices, knowing death may not be far, or who wait in prisons, longing for freedom. Help us all to use our waiting time to good purpose, to make connections, to plan for the future, to repent where necessary, to build up our hope for the life that beckons.

Holy Spirit, come into our lives that we may be enabled to do all we long to do and all you would have us do. Comfort us if we are hurting, knowing the raw pain of bereavement, separation and loss. Build us up again if we have lost courage, nerve and will. Bring healing if we are ill and help us to see beyond what presently afflicts us. If we are at a crossroads, no longer possessed of the old certainties, or simply but truly fearful about the future, come very close and keep us company.

Amen.

Hymn 365: Ride on! ride on in majesty

1 Ride on! ride on in majesty!
Hark! all the tribes 'Hosanna!' cry;
O Saviour meek, pursue thy road
with palms and scattered garments
strowed.

2 Ride on! ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
O Christ, thy triumphs now begin
o'er captive death and conquered sin.

3 Ride on! ride on in majesty!
The wingèd squadrons of the sky
look down with sad and wondering eyes
to see the approaching sacrifice.

4 Ride on! ride on in majesty!
Thy last and fiercest strife is nigh;
the Father on his sapphire throne
awaits his own anointed Son.

5 Ride on! ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
bow thy meek head to mortal pain,
then take, O God, thy power, and reign.

Henry Hart Milman (1791–1868)

Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you and all those whom you love. Now and always.

Amen.

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