

Fickle hearts, faithful God

Matthew 21:1-11

Are you happy in crowds? Have you marched in demonstrations, been to football matches or pop concerts? how do you view them, from within or without? The behaviour of crowds has been part of psychology since the days of Sigmund Freud and whatever views we may have of him, he certainly probed many fundamental questions about what it means to be human.

We can think about this crowd psychology in helping us to understand the Passion Gospel. Any place where human beings congregate can become the setting for behaviour that we would not exhibit alone or among friends. The safe place in a crowd is with the majority. The place of danger is in the minority, standing out against a majority opinion when conscience forbids us to back down.

To be fickle is the archetypal character of a mob as exemplified in these final days of Jesus' earthly life.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem on that day we call Palm Sunday, he is acclaimed as one of royal blood, as the Lord's chosen, and as a prophet. By the end of the week he will be dead.

We dislike fickleness as a rule because our common life depends on being able to trust and also, to a certain extent, predict people's behaviour. But, though we may dislike this quality, we are guilty of it too – in our working lives, personal lives and sometimes in our relationship with God. How many times have you remained silent in a situation, waiting to see which way the wind is blowing, before deciding which way to jump.

For the gospel of the palms, the crowd is joyful. How thrilling and inspiring to have been there that day to participate, to throw down the palms, to whoop and cry aloud with hope and expectation. Last year we witnessed the very differing moods of major crowds with the Queen's Jubilee celebrations and a short period later, her state funeral. The former, happy and noisy, the latter eerily quiet and subdued. Both peaceful in nature, orderly. Crowds you would have been comfortable joining.

With Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem the Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled: 'See your king is coming, riding on a donkey.' Not a proud tall horse, the usual option for royalty, but a humble donkey for Jesus, but nonetheless, the expectation in that moment of triumphant entry was clear.

For Jesus's followers, this was the day that they had been waiting for, the day that all of their learning and discipleship had been leading up to, the day when the rightful king of Jerusalem would be enthroned, and all around would know the truth of Jesus' identity. It's also a day which shines a discerning light on some of the dark realities of human nature.

In Dorothy Sayers play cycle about the life of Jesus – *the Man born to be King* she locates us on Palm Sunday outside the gates of Jerusalem where two different processions are simultaneously converging.

One is the official procession of Pontius Pilate coming up with all the trappings of state power, soldiers and chariots, to keep order at the Passover.

The other is the procession of the rabbis: Jesus coming down the Mount of Olives with a single donkey (rather than horses and chariots) and a ragged bunch of cheering followers (rather than armed and disciplined legionaries).

With the condescending superiority of a colonial governor taking an interest in the strange customs of the natives, Pilate stops and gives way to Jesus through the gateway. He can watch calmly, for this pathetic Messiah on his donkey, on his way to his death on the cross is of no threat to the entrenched power of Rome.

CHEERING CROWDS AND EXPECTANT HEARTS

The question we need to ask ourselves is - 'Why did the crowd shout for Jesus to be crucified, when on Palm Sunday they thought he was the king?'

The crowds that shouted 'hosanna' may well have been the same ones who would soon be shouting 'crucify' and we can't enjoy Palm Sunday without knowing what the days ahead will bring. We can't watch the cheering crowds without knowing that soon it will all change; the adulation will become malice, and the cheering welcome will be replaced by angry violence.

A FICKLE CROWD

The crowd didn't really know who Jesus was. They were just caught up in the excitement — happy to shout hosanna if it looked hopeful that this one was *the one* — but just as happy to shout 'crucify' when the mood changed.

But crowds can be dangerous too. Listening to the BBC Paris Correspondent, Hugh Schofield, commenting on the riots that have been taking place across France against an increase in the state retirement age, Hugh reports that the early part of the demonstration is good humoured and orderly but later descends into violent clashes with the police from political agitators and anarchists who join and turn it nasty and destructive.:

Interestingly, the term 'mob,' comes from the Latin *mobile vulgus*, meaning: 'fickle crowd.' Crowds can be dangerous, and crowds can be fickle.

FICKLE DISCIPLES

But it's not simply the crowd who display fickleness. From Judas' pre-meditated betrayal to Peter's moment of fear — 'I don't know the man you're speaking of' — the disciples too, are fickle in their response to Jesus.

The disciples were quick to express words of confident faith: *Lord, I believe! I will follow you wherever you go. Though others fall away, I never will.*

Confident faith — yet the words weren't able to carry the truth that they intended. For they would fall away, all of them. When it was all going wrong, their confident faith would let them down.

Jesus' entry to Jerusalem is to be seen as a moment of transition, a shift in the gears as Matthew's gospel now moves into a more sacramental mode, eager to show the substance of God's love for the world as it became visible in Jesus' flesh and blood in the drama of the Passion.

The procession of that first Palm Sunday is a carefully planned and striking piece of political theatre. Jesus' entry on a donkey with her foal is in stark contrast to that of Pilate on his carefully bred and maintained horse. Jesus enacts a vision of kingship that is in sharp contrast to that of the Roman Empire and all those who seek to overthrow it with force. Jesus may disturb the political and religious elites and yet he disappoints those who are hoping for a violent revolution.

GOD IS FAITHFUL

Jerusalem is thrown into "turmoil" by the arrival of this joyful and peaceable crowd, made up of followers who have been gathering as Jesus travelled up from Jericho. That turmoil will be intensified by his first actions on arriving in the city of cleansing the Temple and allowing the blind and lame to enter its portals.

Holy Week points us again and again to a God who is faithful, who will continue to reach out to us in love, though our response to Him may be half-hearted and fickle

The word psychologists use to describe the phenomenon at work in the Gospel crowds, football crowds and political crowds is: "deindividuation". Personal responsibility feels diluted when we are part of a group; shame and guilt responses are blunted; anger, greed and self-interest simply feel less wicked when others are doing as we do. So that: "everyone was doing it" can feel like an explanation rather than the excuse it is.

Political actions? Politics for Jesus is about power. But the power that Jesus exercises is that which is life-giving, drawing as it does on the very source of life itself.

As Jesus journeyed to the cross, he was surrounded by some of the worst characteristics of humanity; the greed of Judas, the arrogance of Peter, the cowardice of Pilate, and the jealousy of the High Priest. Yet he continued in complete obedience to his heavenly father, to fulfil his mission. 'It is finished,' he will say on Good Friday.

The journey through Holy Week and towards Easter is a vital one to make every year. Every year we remember the same events, but every year God speaks to us differently through them. Every year there are new resonances and parallels in our own lives, new aspects that we hadn't noticed before. As we look, each year, at the darkness of the human failure that surrounded Jesus, it should encourage us about the depth of God's grace, and the reality of his forgiveness, for them, and for me.

And as we journey with Jesus through Holy Week each year, there's always more to be known, more to be understood, of the price that was paid, the victory that was accomplished, the faithful love that conquered on the cross.

In Holy Week we're invited to acknowledge the fragility and fickleness of our faith too. Like the crowd, like the disciples, we are fickle too. As Christians we have a duty to see the individual in every crowd, if we cannot treat every member of the group as an individual, we must at least try to behave to the whole crowd as we would to each individual part of it.

2000 years on Pilate is remembered only in relation to Jesus; Rome's imperial age is long gone but all over the world millions will sing their hosannas to the Son of David, who comes in the name of the Lord. Which procession are we in – the happy cheering one of the reigning Lord or in the dark violent one of the dominating Emperor. One lesson of the Palm Sunday Gospel is that the Christian calling is not de-individuation, but re-individuation. Amen