

Sunday 2 April 2023
Holy Trinity – Holy Communion (8.00am)
Palm Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2 & 19-end
Matthew 21:1-11

There is a famous story of Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the great explorers and travellers back in the reign of Queen Elizabeth 1. The story goes that on one occasion he was with the queen when she was walking through London and they came to a patch of muddy puddles.

Raleigh quickly took off his cloak and laid it across the puddle so that the queen could pass by without soiling her feet.

Well, this tale may or may not be true, but it became famous because this isn't the sort of thing that happens every day.

It's a very special gesture, especially if (as was probably not the case for Raleigh) the cloak is the only one you have. It demonstrates, quite clearly, that you are celebrating and valuing this person about as highly as you can.

Most of the crowd around Jesus in our Gospel reading today probably didn't have a second cloak, but they spread theirs on the road anyway.

Those of them who knew their scriptures would have been aware that this is exactly what happened when King Jehu was anointed back in Elisha's time and they were determined to do the same this time for Jesus.

We heard that the crowd also waved palm branches to mark Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem.

This also carried 'royal' implications.

Way back in the Israelite memory banks they would have possibly made a connection with the famous Judas Maccabaeus who, two hundred years before, had conquered the pagan armies surrounding Jerusalem.

This was the Judas Maccabaeus who started the royal dynasty which lasted for over a hundred years.

Indeed, the Herod family had intermarried with the Maccabaeon family and many of the chief priests also claimed the same status.

To add to the overall 'royal' effect, the crowd also sang royal hymns and chants. Hosannas!

Welcoming Jesus as "son of David" was about as explicit as it could get. Jerusalem was, after all, the city which King David had made his capital a thousand years before, and for nearly half that time the Jews had been waiting and praying for a king like David to come and save them from their oppressors.

So far as this crowd was concerned, Jesus was going to be just the sort of king they thought they needed.

But Jesus knows, and Matthew has told us, that nothing is quite that simple. We know that Jesus has come to Jerusalem, not to be enthroned like David, or like Judas Maccabaeus, or like Herod for that matter.

No, Jesus has come to Jerusalem to be killed.

The meaning Jesus attaches to this so called triumphal entry is quite different from the meaning the crowd gave to it.

That, perhaps, is where we can learn most from this story today.

People tend to turn to God when there is something they want really badly. Church attendance goes up in leaps and bounds when a major crisis strikes - a war, say, or an earthquake. Suddenly everyone wants Jesus, in terms of today's story, to ride into the city and be the king they want him to be. Give us peace now, pay my bills, and hurry. Save the life of my sick child, and do it right away. Give me a job by this time tomorrow. And, perhaps, the most common prayer of all... Help me.

Jesus intends to answer these and all other prayers.

He doesn't wait for our motives to be pure, or for us to have sorted out our lives to the point where we can look him in the face, eye to eye, as it were.

Of course, he doesn't.

He has come to seek and rescue the lost.

It isn't the healthy who need a doctor but the sick.

However, at the same time he must answer in his own way.

The people wanted a prophet, but this prophet would tell them that their city was under God's imminent judgement.

They wanted a Messiah, but this one was destined not for a throne but execution on a pagan cross.

They wanted to be rescued from evil and oppression, but Jesus was going to go the full hog.

He wasn't going to stop at the surface evil of Roman occupation.

He would go much deeper than that.

Precisely because Jesus says 'yes' to their desires at the deepest level, he will have to say 'no' or 'wait' to some of the stuff they think they need first.

That's the funny thing with prayer - once you invite Jesus to help, he will do it far more thoroughly than you imagined and more deeply than perhaps you wanted.

It's a bit like inviting an accountant to help you with your tax return and then being surprised when he goes through all your financial affairs as well to make sure he's got everything right.

This story of Jesus' grand entry into Jerusalem is an object lesson in the mismatch between our expectations and God's answer.

The bad news is that the crowds are going to be disappointed.

But the good news is that their disappointment, though cruel, is at a surface level.

Deep down, Jesus' arrival at the great city is, indeed, the moment when salvation dawned.

The 'Hosannas' were justified but not for the reason the crowd had supposed.

To learn this lesson is to take a large step towards wisdom and humility, and towards genuine Christian faith.

Amen.