

Hosanna, Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. How familiar we are with the Palm Sunday story – our humble saviour riding on a donkey and being adored by the crowds. How indignant with that fickle crowd we might feel, as we stand here on the brink of Holy Week, and look forward in to the rest of the Passion story, knowing that the crowd are going to turn against Jesus, that he will be betrayed and abandoned by even those closest to him in the week ahead. How easy, with hindsight, it is for us to protest, like Peter, that we will never fall away, we will never disown Jesus – our Lord, our Saviour, our King. We know the end of the story and our minds race ahead to the triumph and the glory of Easter morning. With the children earlier we peeked in to the events of Holy Week and the preparation for the Last Supper. Before we do that this morning, I want to pause and focus in on the ‘Hosanna’ moment and think about it a bit more deeply.

The published readings for today were both from Mark’s gospel and projected us forward in to Holy Week, but when preparing for this service with Gray and Peggy we discussed the reading from Zechariah and it occurred to me that instead of looking forward with the second reading I would like us to rewind 500 years or so and consider this passage first. My study bible tells me that the prophet and priest Zechariah is generally believed to have been born in exile in Babylon and returned to Jerusalem with some of the other priests and the remnant of the Jewish people hoping to rebuild the temple and regain their golden past. The name Zechariah means ‘Yahweh remembers.’ Unfortunately, regaining the past was not as easy as they had hoped. The Jewish people were still living under foreign rule and experiencing economic hardship. Their attempts to re-build Solomon’s great temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians in around 586 BC, ground to a halt several times. Zechariah was a visionary who prophesied in to this situation, encouraged the people to continue re-building the temple and he looked to the coming of the Messiah. Our passage from Zechariah 9 is one of the many Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. Just as with the passage from Jeremiah which Gray explored last week, it references God’s covenant with the Jewish people. This one, however, foretells the Messiah riding in to Jerusalem ‘on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’ All four of the gospels pick up this reference in Jesus’ final entry in to Jerusalem. In Matthew and John the verse from Zechariah is quoted very explicitly. In Luke, and in today’s reading from Mark chapter 11, there is more of a paraphrase but the connection is unmistakeable.

We often consider Jesus’s decision to ride in to Jerusalem on a donkey simply as a demonstration of his humility; gentle Jesus meek and mild - a stark contrast with the status-seeking arrogance and pride of the religious and political rulers in the city. In actual fact, it was far more than that. The connection with the Messianic prophecies was actually an audacious statement of his identity which everyone in Jerusalem at that time would have understood; he was finally throwing down the gauntlet and proclaiming that he was the Messiah. It was a political act as well as a statement of servitude and humility.

Three verses after the place where our gospel reading today finishes, Jesus was in the temple turning over the tables and challenging the behaviour of the religious leaders. Time and time again in the stories of Holy Week we see Jesus, not attacking the Roman oppressors as the Jewish crowds had hoped, but turning on their own religious leaders, the hypocrisy and the corruption in their own religious practices. In the following chapter of Mark we see Jesus quoting the passage from Psalm 118 which we used as our call to worship today, where he identifies himself as ‘the stone the builders rejected’ which has become the ‘cornerstone’. In chapter 13 Mark develops this temple imagery further. Remember that Zechariah’s original prophecy was set at the time when the Jewish people were struggling to re-build their beloved temple. Now we see Jesus prophesying about the second destruction of the temple – which actually occurred in about 70 AD – not long after Jesus’ death, and around the time that Mark’s gospel was being written. We talked about this a little at the Lent study group on Thursday night, and agreed that the passage was rather puzzling. Looking at it in this wider context, however, it’s possible to see Mark’s references to the temple here as yet another way of linking Jesus with the Messianic prophecies, both backwards to the destruction at the hands of the Babylonians and forwards to the Roman siege of Jerusalem. In Mark chapter 14, after Jesus’s arrest, witnesses claim to have heard Jesus say that he would destroy the temple and re-build it in three days. This is described by Mark as ‘false testimony’ but it serves to connect Jesus’s death and resurrection with the destruction and rebuilding of the temple which was so central to the Jews’ religious identity. In the discussion which immediately follows this conversation, Jesus’s response, when asked ‘Are you the Messiah,

the Son of the Blessed One?’ is to say, ‘I am.’ No wonder the Sanhedrin was shocked. No wonder Jesus was crucified. Jesus on a donkey was Jesus as Messiah, but not as anyone had expected.

Returning to Zechariah, we can see what this was supposed to mean to the Jews: ‘never again will an oppressor overrun my people,’ ‘your king comes to you righteous and victorious.’ To the Jews, the arrival of the Messiah meant freedom from Roman oppression just as the people in Zechariah’s day had escaped Babylonian rule. We know that many of them expected Jesus to shake off the Roman occupation and restore power to their own religious leaders. The crowd’s ‘Hosannas’ were a direct echo of the chorus of rejoicing referenced in Zechariah. Their expectation of the breaking of the ‘battle bow’ and the proclamation of peace to the nations was of a military challenge and a military victory. How wonderful it would be if Jesus came to wave a magic wand, solve all our problems, bring peace to the nations (peace on our terms, of course!). No wonder that when that didn’t happen, their support turned to rage and rejection. In Mark 15 there is a suggestion that the chief priests, angry at the challenges Jesus posed to their own authority, incited the crowd against Jesus, but to be honest that wouldn’t have been a difficult job when the frustrated crowds had seen how little like a military leader Jesus had behaved once he got off his donkey.

So, how does all this apply to us today? Do we smile fondly as we turn the pages of this story and, with the benefit of hindsight, from the other side of the cross, claim to know better? If so, what does ‘better’ look like? We must be careful not to be seduced by the ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild rhetoric’, encouraging us to become doormats – servile and useless objects for the world to wipe its feet upon... or to swing the other way and to try to appropriate divine power and authority to justify our own causes and priorities.

Our hymns so far this morning have echoed with ‘Hosannas’, with regal and majestic language describing Jesus as our Lord and King – a figure of great power and authority. Of course we can take comfort from that kind of language. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is a great comfort and blessing in our lives, the ultimate power and authority to whom we rightly defer, but we need to be careful not to super-impose our own, human notions of kingship and majesty on to God. We need to remind ourselves that, in Holy Week, Jesus relinquished all earthly power and authority and died a brutal death between two common criminals. ‘Hosanna’ moments can be a dangerous distraction. How often do we use our faith to claim the moral high ground, to identify ourselves with the virtuous, the great and the good? In reality we often behave just like the crowds in Jerusalem and jump on the ‘Hosanna’ bandwagon, building ourselves up and wanting to be on the winning side – looking for a saviour who will act in our best interests, and moving swiftly on when our best interests are not served? Do we support and approve of authority figures who promise us power and status, comfort and security, superiority... control? We need to be careful, as we step in to Holy Week, not to over simplify the story, to remind ourselves just how subversive and political Jesus’ actions were and to ride the donkey rather than wave the palm leaves.

Perhaps for a moment we might consider our responses to the various news stories of the week from this perspective: the arguments about Brexit or the stand-off with the Russians, the war in Syria or the way our social media addictions can be used to manipulate democratic elections and push fake news. To try to infer which side of the Brexit vote Jesus would place himself on, or how he would respond to the political posturing between today’s superpowers is perhaps missing the point. Jesus refused to take sides in the political posturing of his day between the Roman and Jewish authorities and challenged at a deeper level, focusing on injustice and oppression and the sins of the heart. His final response to worldly power was to confront it spectacularly in this glorious Palm Sunday charge in to Jerusalem and then demonstrate a total indifference to it, allowing it to crush his physical self completely because his focus was elsewhere – was on the divine. Now none of us have the status or celebrity required to successfully confront Putin or Asad or even Theresa May or Jeremy Corbyn, but we do have political responsibilities to look deeper than the superficial issues and political posturing as we exercise our vote, and lobby our MPs, to consider the ways we prioritise the spending of our time and money, the ways we use social media. Do we wave our 21st century Palm branches by clicking ‘like’, typing hasty comments or sharing memes enthusiastically without any real thought for the underlying issues or the consequences of our actions? This week, in the light of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, are we taking enough care to question the way our profiles and our online identities are being used and manipulated to further ends which we may not support?

If that’s all a bit too big, and too political for a Sunday morning, what about the ‘Hosanna’ effect in our own lives, our domestic relationships and friendships, our work and school environments, our Church?

Where is Jesus on the donkey in our midst? Are we genuinely challenging injustice and journeying towards the cross, or are we interested in accumulating wealth, power, comfort or status for our own sake, to serve our own interests, to provide a cosy club? Like the fickle, palm-waving crowds, do we participate in certain events or activities, or make life choices which ensure our own interests are served, that we will be seen to be part of the right crowd of friends, or to make the right kind of grand gestures? Are we, perhaps, like the religious leaders who challenged Jesus, convincing ourselves of our own humility, our own righteousness and excluding or silencing those who make us uncomfortable and disturb our sense of what's right?

Our Lent discussions this year have focused on the book *40 Stories of Hope* and have included stories from prisoners about their conversion experiences and the hope that a relationship with Christ has brought to their lives. We've had to grapple with some difficult ideas about being able to forgive and trust people who have done terrible things and committed awful crimes, about judgement and punishment and grace. How would we respond if a convicted criminal walked through our doors? Would we be able to offer hope?

We have a lot to be thankful for in our Tab community. It is genuinely a place of blessing and comfort for people from a variety of backgrounds and with very diverse needs. Our Pastoral Care team offers support and fellowship to many and its outreach is rooted in weekly prayer and consultation. Through our children's work, our groups such as Open Door, Connect At, Foodbank, Family Café and Soul Café, Child Contact, Colour me Calm, Chop and Chat and our partnerships with P3, The Door and The Town Council we make a real difference and we offer hope and support to many, many people beyond our own membership. Through Alpha and other discussion groups we feed people's faith and spiritual growth. Next week, as we proclaim the Risen Christ on Easter Day, we will welcome seven new members in to our expanding Tab family. We might appear to have all the answers - the shining example of a model church. Hosanna!

We mustn't rest on our palm branches though; our growing church family requires adjustment as relationships grow and change. People need to be made properly welcome, not superficially welcome, they need to be encouraged, empowered and allowed to flourish in the family without ever feeling exploited or pushed. In a few weeks we hold our AGM and look forward in to a new church year. AGMs in recent years have been very poorly attended and if you want to know more about some of the activities and programmes in the church, or understand more about how the Tab works, you should try to make a point of reading the annual reports and attending that meeting. Even if you feel that you only have the time or energy to spectate from the roadside these days, you can be involved in Tab family discussion and decision making, and pray about the actions of others. In this year's meeting we will turn our attention to the election of new Elders and the impact on our leadership structure as we support Simon in his new role as area minister and confront the need for our Church to apply for charitable status. We teeter on the brink of the next phase of our development project to include the refurbishment of our very own Upper Rooms; what vision do we have for that work, what sort of changes do we need to make, what use do we want from our building, how best can we grow God's kind of kingdom here in Dursley, rather than an earthly one? Will we engage with these activities and decisions lovingly and prayerfully, or stand passively by on the road-side, waving Palm branches before drifting away in indifference, or storming away in protest when things don't fit with our priorities or agendas? Will we convince ourselves of our own importance and try to serve our own interests, stifling the spirit and crucifying the Christ in our midst?

As we move in to Holy Week this year, let's keep our 'Hosannas' in context and look deeper than the happy cheering face of the Palm Sunday crowd, let's make sure that Jesus is our 'cornerstone,' the foundation on which we stand, and let's hope and pray that we don't follow the fickle majority or the self-righteous religious leaders, but – guided by the spirit – we move forward together, with Jesus on his donkey in our midst.