

Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield

Palm Sunday, 5th of April 2009

Mark 11:1-11

Four gospels; four different accounts of the event we remember today on what we call “Palm Sunday”. It’s only John who gives us the palms from which today takes its name; the other three gospels don’t tell us what the leafy branches were. Each of the gospels gives us different details of the event. Matthew has the whole city in an uproar, everyone asking who Jesus could be, and children singing Hosanna in the Temple. Luke has the Pharisees telling Jesus to ask his disciples to be quiet, and Jesus replying that if his disciples were quiet the stones would shout out. John tells us that the crowd left Jerusalem to welcome Jesus, because they knew about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. The crowds in Matthew acclaim Jesus as the Son of David; in Luke they refer to him as the king; in John they call him the king of Israel.

By combining details from all the gospels we have the church’s celebration of Palm Sunday, an Easter before Easter, a great festival. Jesus enters Jerusalem to choruses of praise and a crowd going wild. Rather than entering as most pilgrims do, on foot, Jesus enters riding a donkey, and the people cut down branches and place them before him, spreading their cloaks on the road. They greet him as the Son of David, the king of Israel, the one who comes in the name of the Lord. They acclaim him as a prophet. They shout “Hosanna”. There is jubilation and celebration. This version of Palm Sunday raises the troubling question of what we are to do with all this at the beginning of Holy Week, in Lent, the period of penitence and preparation that began with Ash Wednesday and the reminder of our deaths. We are entering the period of Christ’s passion, following him on the journey that will lead to the cross. In between the reminder of our deaths on Ash Wednesday and the commemoration of Christ’s death on Good Friday, where does this celebration fit? In the light of all that will follow it, what does Palm Sunday mean?

The particular version we hear read today, from the Gospel of Mark, helps us answer this question, because Mark’s story is *not* the overwhelming celebration that is the church’s Palm Sunday. Mark does not have Jesus acclaimed as king; the crowds quote psalm 118: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”, but they then go on to say: “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David.” A suggestion that Jesus will be the one to restore this kingdom, certainly, but not an acclamation of Jesus as king. In Mark’s story, the procession only accompanies Jesus to the entrance of the city; Mark describes Jesus entering Jerusalem quietly: “Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.” Matthew and Luke have Jesus immediately cleansing the Temple in the middle of a noisy crowd, but Mark tells us that the cleansing of the Temple waited for another day. What’s going on in this quiet, subdued tale?

The colt gives us a clue. More than half of today’s story is focused on the acquiring of a colt that had never been ridden. Matthew ties this in with the prophecy of Zechariah that the king of Jerusalem would enter the city “humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” For Matthew, this is part of the affirmation of Jesus’ kingly status. John refers to the same prophecy, and in his gospel Jesus finds a donkey in the middle of the procession, accepting the crowd’s acclamation of him as king. Mark doesn’t refer to Zechariah’s prophecy. All Mark says is that the colt is somehow, amazingly, available for Jesus, and that it has never been ridden. That might indicate that it’s suitable for sacred purposes. Or it might indicate how very new the things that Jesus is doing are. Others have entered and will enter Jerusalem in triumph; others have tried to bring back the kingdom of David. That isn’t what Jesus is doing.

All through the ride to Jerusalem Jesus is silent. He doesn’t respond to the cries of the crowds, to their cloak and branches-throwing. He is silent in the Temple, looking but not yet acting to drive out those buying and selling. The crowd might think that they are taking part in a triumph; Jesus knows that what is really happening is a funeral procession.

The crowd did get one thing right. In their greetings they call out “Hosanna,” meaning “Save now” or “Save please”. Salvation wasn’t what the crowd was demanding; they were using it as a simple exclamation of praise, like Hallelujah. But their cry was truer than they knew. They were crying for salvation to the only person who could give it to them; the one who through his death and resurrection will offer us, too, the new life that we need.

Today is *not* a celebration; *not* the Easter before Easter, because we can’t enjoy the resurrection before the crucifixion. Today is only the beginning of Holy Week; we still need to walk with Jesus step by step on his journey to the Cross. Mark’s strange, enigmatic, story of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem reminds us that Jesus, his disciples, the crowds, and us, still have a long way to go before the story is finished.