Palm Sunday Sermon

On this day last year, I was sharing in worship with two churches just outside Rochdale near Manchester. One was a traditional Church of England communion service. The other was an outdoor ecumenical service, with a brass band to aid our singing. Both services began with a Palm Sunday procession, complete with two donkeys; each of which was more accustomed to giving rides to young children on the pleasure beaches of Blackpool. The donkeys added an air of authenticity as we sought to re-enact the story we’ve just heard, of Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem; and the children particularly loved it. We waved our palm crosses and sang the usual Palm Sunday hymn - Ride on, ride in in majesty - seeking to enter into the story ourselves. But what we couldn’t re-enact was the level of high expectation that the crowd had as Jesus entered Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday.

Jesus was a popular preacher and teacher who’d drawn crowds before. They were captivated by his stories and parables and the hope that he brought to the most ordinary of people as he taught them about God and the coming of God’s Kingdom. Many had seen him heal the sick and perform all kinds of miracles. Indeed we meet him here, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, having just come from Bethany where he’d raised Lazarus from the dead - according to the gospel writer John.

But there was more that we couldn’t recreate with our Palm Sunday processions last year, and that was the hope of the people for a deliverer, a saviour who would free them from Roman domination. Jesus has shown himself willing to stand up to the religious elite of his day and defy their authority. Surely, here was someone who could gather an army and overthrow the occupying powers of Rome. That hoped-for deliverance of Israel - the land  and the people that God has chosen and promised so much to - was something that is hard for us to imagine, never mind re-create, even with the most authentic of Palm Sunday processions.

On one level, Jesus’s entry didn’t disavow the crowds of this. He was arriving in the capital city and he was arriving on a donkey with a foal at its side, as the OT prophet had written: ’Look, your king is coming to you...mounted on a donkey and a colt.’ It’s as if Jesus was saying in no uncertain terms, ‘Yes, here I am, your king’, and the people all around cut palm branches and waved them in jubilation. They lay their cloaks before him, as befits a king, and must have had in their minds former kings who’d triumphantly entered Jerusalem: David, a king par excellence, and Judas Maccabaeus, a conqueror and deliverer who’d arrived in Jerusalem only 200 or so years before, having defeated the pagan armies of those who’d oppressed Israel.

The hopes and expectations are high as they sing and shout, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’ This is how the holiest week of the Christian year begins; with great joy, and Jesus surrounded by adoring crowds.

But, Jesus’s understanding of kingship and of what he was doing was about as different as you could get from what the crowds were expecting and hoping for. He was a king, yes. But one that was going to be enthroned on a cross, with a crown, not of gold, but of thorns. He was a conqueror, yes. But one that conquered not the temporary powers of the occupying Roman forces, but the powers of sin and death and hell. And a deliverer that delivered his people from chains that bound and enslaved them and prevented them from becoming all that God has created them to be. Jesus was coming to bring a freedom and a peace that would last into all eternity and would be for everyone.

One of the definitions of the word ‘passion’ is ‘being done to’. And so, as we enter Holy Week once again, and are taken up with the passion of our Lord, one way of understanding this is to see it as the time when Jesus stopped doing and initiating, and allowed himself to be done to by others. He gave himself into the hands of his enemies letting go of all power and control; handing himself over to the power and control of others to do the worst they could with him. This is the Christian understanding of the cross. It’s only as Jesus embraced within himself all the hatred and violence, all the fear and darkness of our world, that he could triumph over it. As is summarised in our other reading today from the letter to the Christians in Philippi, ‘ he humbled himself and became obedient to the pointing death, death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him.’

This understanding of the word ‘passion’ is worth reflecting on as we journey through this week. We live in a time when many, if not all of us, are feeling ‘done to’ and we have lost control of much of our lives. Our freedoms have been severely compromised. We can’t do what we’re used to doing. We can’t go wherever it is we want to go. Our lives suddenly feel very restricted, bound by rules and laws not in place only a few weeks ago. We feel we have little by way of choice. We have little by way of control, either of the virus or of how we spend our days. More than one person has said to me how ironic it is that we now have whole days stretching out before us but we struggle to know how to spend them or structure them because of the constraints placed upon us.

It may be helpful to reflect on this as we walk with Jesus through his passion: to reflect on what it means to let go of needing to have control; of what it means to be done to and for, rather than us doing the doing or doing the giving. There may be something here about learning what it means to be humble - a word used of Jesus in both of our readings today - and what it means to let go and allow God to do ‘to and for’ us, rather than us busying ourselves doing for God all the time.

However we spend this Holy Week, it will be like no other we’ve travelled through before. May we be given the grace to allow God to use this time, in this Holy Week, to lead us more deeply into the passion of his Son, so that we know more fully the freedom into which he is inviting all of us.

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