

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 13th April 2025, Palm Sunday

Readings: **Isaiah 50:4-9a**

Philippians 2:5-11

Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29

Luke 19:28-40

For reasons that baffle me, the lectionary suggests that the Gospel reading this weekend should be Luke's version of the Last Supper, or his version of the Crucifixion. This is ironic because many churches today will have decorated pews, walls, and doorways with palm fronds; read aloud Luke's description of the entry into Jerusalem, blessed palm branches, and processing around the church have sung: *'All glory, praise and honour to you Redeemer King'*. Later in the service palm leaves, folded into palm-crosses, will be given to each person and all will leave the church anticipating the journey of Holy Week.

Yet, despite the visual reminders of palms being waved and people singing 'Hosanna!' we are supposed to think about the Last Supper, or the Crucifixion!

Some have argued – I think unconvincingly – that this is because many people will not come to services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, so it's an opportunity for them to remember these important events before Easter celebrations next week. Certainly, if a person listened to the entry into Jerusalem on one Sunday, and then the Resurrection story the following week, they may feel bewildered and wonder what had happened!

However, if we don't pause to think about the entry into Jerusalem then it's hard to understand why there was such angst toward Jesus from the Jewish religious authorities, and the Roman administration. An angst that led to betrayal, false accusation, a mob jury, and an undeserved death. I think it's helpful to imagine the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as a critical turning point which had an almost inevitable conclusion.

The story is familiar, but it's worth touching base with the main elements.

Jesus was a Jewish man who had been teaching for about three years, and during this time had developed quite a following. His teaching was regarded as controversial by some, and even heretical by others, because he had the audacity to suggest that God's love was more generous and compassionate than most people could understand. He suggested that animal sacrifices at the Temple was not what pleased God but, rather, lives characterised by mercy and love. He befriended those who the religion of his time had written off and assured them that God loved them just as much anyone else – maybe more so! So, tax-collectors, sex workers, lepers, and heaps of other people on society's edge found in Jesus new hope, new community, and new purpose in their living.

It must have been galling to the religious authorities because the credibility of Jesus was repeatedly backed up by miraculous healing. As time went by people started to wonder if Jesus was a great prophet like Elijah, or the new king that had been promised by Jewish prophets for centuries. A king like the great King David; a Messiah, who would rescue them from the ignominy of Roman occupation.

It was one thing to have those questions asked about an itinerant Rabbi in the provinces far from the seat of power, but it was quite another to have that man come to Jerusalem surrounded by supporters chanting '*Hosanna!*' and '*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!*' For Jewish religious leaders this would have been heretical because, they did not recognise Jesus as one sent by God; and, for the Roman administration these affirmations would have been both laughable and treasonous.

Controversially, Jesus chose to ride a donkey into the great city of Jerusalem, in the same way that King David had ridden a donkey when he returned to Jerusalem in peace a thousand years earlier. This is important for us to remember because we don't have royalty, or rock stars; Prime Ministers, or Premiers... riding donkeys! The donkey seems to have been recognised by the crowd as a symbol of royal authority and it helped to answer their question. Jesus WAS the promised one! Jesus WAS the Messiah!

The crowd was on-board, and wildly excited, because it seemed that God was finally doing something to liberate them. Why not shout '*Hosanna!*' and '*Hallelujah!*' and throw your cloaks on the ground hoping that somehow it would be blessed by his shadow, or the feet of his donkey!

The anxious Pharisees asked Jesus to tell the crowd to stop shouting these things because it could put the whole Jewish community at risk. '*Teacher,*' they begged, '*order your disciples to stop...*' ...before the Romans hear! Before Pilate sends his troops to arrest people and bring order through violence, '*...order your disciples to stop!*'

I wish we could have kept on reading through to the end of chapter nineteen instead of stopping at this exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees. For when we do read on the Gospel writer describes Jesus then weeping for the people of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), intuitively anticipating the future destruction of the city. Jesus then went to the Temple to pray, but instead of praying he drove out the money lenders and publicly shamed the religious leadership of the temple. It was this action that appears to have been '*the straw that broke the camel's back...*'

Because he called out the institutional hypocrisy of Temple authority, and because he had the support of the crowd, it seems that Jesus had become a threat that had to be eliminated. Maybe it was the self-interest of both religious and secular institutions – for

both Caiaphas the high priest, and Herod the Jewish king, agreed to manipulate a confused crowd... and a confused Roman administrator.

Without the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, or the confrontation in the Temple, it's likely that Jesus would have lived to a ripe old age! That the meal in the upper room would not have been his last, that his prayer in Gethsemane would not have been interrupted by soldiers, and that Golgotha would not have witnessed his last breath.

So, what we remember on Palm Sunday could be considered pivotal.

As we remember the choices that Jesus made on that day it's helpful to consider what implications there may be for all who follow Christ today? Are we simply the passive recipients of all that was achieved one week later in resurrection, or are we similarly called to challenge religious and secular hypocrisy and injustice in our time?

The Jesus who roared at the money lenders and animal traders to get out of the temple was the same Jesus who had tenderly healed the sick, fed the hungry, and wept when his friend Lazarus died. Clearly his blood was up, he was angry, and he wanted things to change. So, I wonder what injustice gets our blood up enough, and makes us angry enough, to do something to bring about change?

This is not intended to be a rhetorical question but rather a question for each of us to take into prayer in this Holy Week: *'What injustice gets our blood up enough, and makes us angry enough, to do something to bring about change?'* The answer to that question may confirm something we're already doing, or it may become a catalyst for us to start working with others to bring about positive change. It may guide what charities we financially support, where we volunteer our time, and how we vote next month in the federal election.

Would you please join me as we close in prayer:

God of justice and hope, we give thanks for your love and ask for the grace and guidance of your Spirit in our lives this week. We pray in the name of the one who said, *'Not my will but yours...'* Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen