

Sunday 24th March – Palm Sunday. Reverend Alison Bruton

Readings: Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29; Mark 11: 1-11

When you read the account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, I wonder what goes through your mind. For me, the focus of my thoughts isn't wholly on Jesus and the significance of what he was doing. Whether he was on a donkey as John describes it or a colt as Mark and Luke have it or even both as we see in Matthew, his mode of transport and his entry into Jerusalem was certainly evocative of the words in our Psalm which would also have been in the back of the minds of many in the crowd who had been longing for what felt like forever for the Messiah to come who would take the place by storm and who would overturn the Roman occupation. Whilst this might have been the driving force behind the triumphal entry, I suspect there were a number who were already having doubts as to whether this person riding on a lowly animal and not a military charger was really the one they had been expecting for so long.

My thoughts tend towards the crowd, how it behaved on Palm Sunday and subsequently when they witnessed Jesus' condemnation, and this is where I want to focus this morning.

When we think of crowds what feelings come into our minds? Crowds sometimes can be intimidating and yet sometimes supportive. There are cheering crowds like when Wolves score a goal, but there can also be jeering crowds and there is also a 'crowd mentality' where individuals behave in a way that they never would if you came across them on their own. Crowd behaviour allows no space for individual thoughtfulness, no time for reflection, just an immediate and mass response.

Going back to my football analogy, there are usually two sides in a crowd, the home fans and the away fans. There are the cheerers and the jeerers, those who are for and those who are against. Sometimes, you get a crowd that can become both supportive and hostile depending on the circumstances. So often the balance is delicate and fragile for a crowd can soon turn on you, just ask any football manager or team if they are on a bad run of results. It even happens during a game when individual players make a poor pass and lose the ball...cheerers soon become jeerers on those occasions. I must admit I do question whether the term 'fan' is even appropriate for such people.

The crowd that Jesus faced on that day when he entered Jerusalem started off as a cheering and supportive crowd but watch what happened to the cheering masses, as in a very few days, those same people are going to be a very different sort of a crowd, those who were cheering would soon be jeering.

But this isn't the first time that Jesus had attracted these two opposite types of response. For example, we read in John 9 where Jesus healed the man born blind by making mud with dirt and spit and anointing his eyes with it. There were two reactions; the man who was healed believed that Jesus was God's son and believed, whereas the Pharisees did not believe, they wanted to make an example of the healed man and to throw him out of the synagogue, their place of worship; they even questioned whether the man had been healed at all. So, we have some who are for, the cheerers, and we have some who are against, the jeerers.

And when we look past Good Friday, past Easter, to the events of Pentecost and to the time when the Spirit descended on the disciples like tongues of flame and they began to praise God and speak in other languages, we discover that some of the onlookers saw it as a

miraculous event. To others it was just like a big drinking party! “They are filled with new wine” they said, again we have the cheerers and the jeerers.

There was a big crowd in Jerusalem that day with lots of people who didn’t even know who Jesus was – even though he’d been much talked about in the area in recent weeks. It was Passover time, when many Jews from far and wide would be there celebrating this special feast, perhaps travelling to Jerusalem for this one and only time in their life. This crowd on this day was in a happy mood were ready to celebrate.

And Jesus, knowing the mood of the city just before Passover, knowing the prophecies concerning how the Messiah would enter Jerusalem and knowing what would come later, rode into the city on a donkey with his disciples beside him. But Jesus was aware of what was to come, even as the people shouted on Sunday Hosanna in the highest – hosanna to the Son of David – Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. He could anticipate where this would all end up. The same crowd would shout out when Pilate asked them “What should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” “Let him be crucified!” How quickly things can change, one week hailed as the Son of David, the next just another victim, an object, to be spat upon and scorned to be beaten and killed. The cheerers had become jeerers in so very few days.

So today, the Sunday before that Friday we sing praises to Jesus we cheer along with the crowd that cheered for Jesus. But to a certain extent we cheer with a degree of sadness in the knowledge of what is to come. And in that we are perhaps somewhat closer to Christ and his knowledge of the real situation than the disciples were.

But as for that crowd that met Jesus on Palm Sunday, we too need to make our decision as to who we say Jesus is. Now the mind of a crowd can move this way and that; it can be very frightening and if you’re in a crowd like that there are probably only a couple of safe ways to behave; either go along with the masses or keep quiet; and if you don’t agree, better stay silent, or even leave unnoticeably. I suspect that on Good Friday there may have been many who played it safe and kept quiet, or even decided to go along with the masses and jeer the man they had cheered only a few days before.

The question we each need to consider this morning is ‘where am I in the crowd?’ Am I a cheerer or can I all too easily become a jeerer, one who finds it easier to go along with the crowd and not stand up for my faith when it might be a bit tricky, a bit embarrassing or even make me the butt of a joke? Perhaps your palm cross might be a great starting point? Placed in a position of prominence it might bring about the start of a conversation that will enable you to continue your role as a cheerer.

As we hold our palm crosses let’s take a moment to reflect on what they signify. For me I personally find the idea of waving it around in celebration a bit difficult, given that the shape that the palm leaf has been fashioned into is evocative of the means of Jesus’ death. Nevertheless, it is an empty cross, a cross which signifies resurrection, a cross which indicates forgiveness.

As we embark on this Holy Week, let’s be thankful that we know the bigger picture, what lies beyond Good Friday, so we can make that decision to remain the cheerers that we need to be in order to witness to our faith and build God’s kingdom in this place.