

Lent 6: PALM SUNDAY THOUGHTS

Philippians 2:5-11, Mark 11:1-11 [MW18-10]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 25 March 2018

I was sitting at my desk trying to work out how many Palm Sunday

- sermons I had prepared
- how many Palm Sunday services I had taken part in
- how many I had sat through
- quite a few!
- so then I was wondering, really wondering
- what can I say that is fresh and new???
- no doubt many, most?, of you have been part of a fair number of Palm Sunday services ...
- so what is left to be said ... ???
- is there some impossibly new angle???
- and I did come across this cartoon, which seemed to fit my thinking [slide]

So then I started thinking: what is the point of “Palm Sunday”?

- before, *before* consulting commentaries, scholars, Lent and Holy Week books all of which I have done since my time at St John's Theological College
- I sat and considered that Palm Sunday “happening” and came up with Popularity, Celebration, Fun
- it was a huge deal that seemed to draw in heaps and heaps of people
- which goes directly against what has been the case up to that point

In Mark's gospel especially

- we have seen that Jesus did not want people to know who he was
- the demons were prevented from speaking about him
- people were healed and instructed to say nothing about it
- Jesus did not want to be acknowledged as “Messiah”, “Son of God” or indeed by any title that singled him out as special
- he positively shied away from any kind of recognition or popular acclaim

And perhaps there is some real sense, some necessary practicality, in that

- unfortunately we can easily come up with far too many examples of popular leaders in a particular field
- who started so well and were doing great things
- but then it is as if their very popularity and success leads them to go off the rails in one way or another and fall from grace sometimes spectacularly
- you can even see it in governing parties who began by listening to people and being inclusive and working alongside other groups
- but then start acting on their own because they think they know best

Jesus was very keen not to do that and successfully avoided that pitfall

- perhaps that is why he spent so long in the desert
- but now, today, all that seems to have changed
- and I found myself wondering “what is going on here”?
- and that's when I come back to: Popularity, Celebration, Fun

The end is near, well maybe not so much “the end”

- as things coming to a head, a decisive point
Jesus knows that
we know that
- but I don't think anyone else around knows that, yet

So who would deny Jesus a bit of fun?

- who would refuse him some celebration before the 'dark events' come in to play?

Here then is my new, fresh thought for Palm Sunday:

- this is the only time Jesus got anything like the welcome, the recognition the celebration and honour he deserved
- consider ... he arrived on earth with no fanfare
he began his ministry with no big introduction, in Galilee
a backwater province in a small, insignificant, backwater country
- and, and, when he had won the victory, was raised from death
when he had conquered the grave and the powers of evil
who knew, who knew???
- there was no civic celebration, no ticker tape parade
nothing like when the America's Cup came back to New Zealand
- Jesus rose from the dead and there were groups here and there who saw him
but there was no massed gathering to celebrate

The 'Triumphal Entry', Palm Sunday

- crowds of cheering, happy people
so much joyful commotion that the Pharisees told Jesus to control his followers
and make them be quiet
- Jesus replied that if they were silent the very stones would cry out in praise
some celebration!
- and who could begrudge him that
surely he deserved it

So to my way of thinking, maybe this Triumphal Entry-Palm Sunday event

- makes up for the celebration Jesus does not get a week from now
when he rose from the dead on what we call Easter Sunday
- so he can let his hair down, just a bit
enjoy the cheers, back slapping, high fives
- popularity, celebration, fun
knowing what was soon to come, it seems fair enough, doesn't it???

Have you seen those war movies, where the soldiers are engaged in a fierce battle

- bullets, explosions, blood, carnage all around
then it stops for a while
and the soldiers enjoy a break and do things that seem rather incongruous
in the middle of a war
- like the British and German soldiers in the frontline trenches in World War 1
who played a football match in “no man's land” on Christmas Eve
(might have better if they'd let that determine who won the war!)

What might that tell us?

- like Jesus, take the long term view and prepare
but also take the moments to celebrate when you can
- apparently the soldiers' motto is:
eat whenever the opportunity presents itself
sleep when you can
because you never know when you'll next get the chance
- celebrate the joy of life whenever the opportunity is there

Jesus was on his way to a cruel, painful death on the cross

- surely it was okay to spend just one day enjoying things with that crowd?!

We are perhaps not exactly in a war

- however we are in the midst of life
with everything a strange and perplexing universe throws at us
- when the appropriate moment presents itself
enjoy and celebrate life

And alongside that, I also note this with a huge asterisk and flashing neon sign

- in the midst of this celebration
through the cheers, welcome, recognition that Jesus surely deserved
- even here Jesus remained true to himself
true to his calling, true to the path that lay before him
- Jesus most definitely did not have a sense of "entitlement"
Jesus did not seek, nor demand, recognition
he accepted it this one time, and only this one time, and made it part of his mission
- how did Jesus enter the city???
wearing a simple robe and riding on a donkey
- Jesus rode to the beginning of life in our midst on a donkey
as his mother Mary, heavily pregnant, went to Bethlehem
- Jesus rode to the beginning of his death in our midst on a donkey
even as the crowds waved palms and cheered with overwhelming joy

Jesus rode through the celebration

- accepting it
perhaps even enjoying this moment
- but Jesus rode on ... he rode on
never once being distracted
never once losing sight of where he was going
- never once

Perhaps this too is a lesson for us

- accept and enjoy such occasions
and at the same time remember that popularity, celebration, fun
are merely things along the way and not the ultimate destination
- remain true to your calling
keep your sense of direction
remember always who you are
- a daughter or son of God
following in the footsteps of Jesus

So this morning we have what we call “Palm Crosses”

- reminding us of the palms waved in joy and welcome
and in the shape of a cross
for the way that real, lasting joy comes to us

I am going to conclude by reading a “Palm Sunday Reflection”

- then bless our Palm Crosses and distribute them
I invite you then to hold your cross and reflect
as we listen to the reading from the Letter to the Philippians

Palm Sunday Reflection: [Slide]

Ride on Lord Jesus.

*Upon a colt,
over cloaks,
under branches –
ride on Lord Jesus.*

*Towards a city,
through its gates,
past the crowds –
ride on Lord Jesus.*

*As Hosannas fade
and enemies sneer,
as danger closes
and friends falter –
ride on Lord Jesus.*

*Showing the way,
teaching the truth,
bringing life for all.
In the name of the Lord –
ride on Lord Jesus - ride on ...*

Blessing for Palm Crosses:

*Loving God,
on this day,
Jesus entered the holy city of Jerusalem in triumph,
and was proclaimed as King of Kings
by those who spread their garments
and branches of palm along his way.
Let these palm crosses be for us signs of his victory
and grant that we who wear them
may always hail him as our King
and follow him on the way that leads to eternal life.
AMEN.*

Read Philippians 2:5-11 [Slide]