

## Lent 6: PALM SUNDAY

Matthew 21:1-11 [MW17-09]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 09 April 2017

[Video clip of Triumphant Entry]

Why do you think the people welcomed Jesus so enthusiastically?

- what do you think the arrival of Jesus in this way meant to them?

While you ponder that, I'm going to read a "Liturgical Poem"

- that perhaps sheds some light on the crowds and the celebration then and now
- it's titled "I Celebrate the Church of Jesus Christ"

*I celebrate the church of Jesus Christ,  
where two or three or thousands can gather together  
in the Lord's name  
and touch this world  
with the amazing good news that somebody cares,  
that God joins us in community so that someday  
this world will be loved to wholeness.*

*I celebrate this community,  
where the people say Yes in the face of No,  
where they light candles in the darkest night,  
where healing and compassion leave no time for self-righteousness,  
and the life-sustaining love of Christ is evident in the life of the believers*

*I celebrate the church, where we dare to stand up,  
where risk runs rampant,  
and you and I and all Christ's disciples  
are called upon to follow  
even when it costs us something,  
something precious*

*Because when we follow, as Jesus did  
God breaks through*

*and fills us with a holy spirit that overflows  
and we see rainbows,  
many-splendored colours,  
light in pitch darkness —  
and every day is a festival of faith! (Anne Weems in Reaching for Rainbows)*

Every day is a 'festival of faith'

- today we are remembering an unplanned festival  
for us it is very much planned and prepared for
- we have special songs and words  
we have palm crosses made beforehand
- for us it is a celebration of faith, but then we know the whole story

Back when these events took place, nothing special was planned

- it just happened  
sparked off when Jesus rode into the holy city  
on a donkey
- and that crowd welcomed Jesus enthusiastically  
wildly, excitedly, over the top

- it makes me wonder:  
what was going on for those people, that they responded to Jesus like this?
- Jesus, arriving as he did, really affected people  
there was a carnival atmosphere of joy and celebration

And then again, just five days later, those joyful shouts of "Hosanna!"

- had become angry shouts of "Crucify!"  
the cheering crowd which had welcomed Jesus  
transformed into a hostile mob who booed and cursed him
- it makes me wonder  
what was going on for these people that they responded like this?

Perhaps something of an answer lies in that traditional story

- about four blind men and an elephant

Four blind men were told that an elephant was nearby. None of them had ever seen one. "I'll go over and feel the elephant and tell you what it is like," volunteered the first blind man. He found his way over to a long, fat, wiggly thing and felt it. Then he returned to the other men and said, "An elephant is like a very large writhing snake. I'm staying away from it."

"That doesn't sound quite right," said another blind man. "I'll have to feel for myself." He went over and felt the tall, rough sides of the elephant. "It feels like a wall to me. Nothing to be afraid of."

The third blind man said, "That doesn't fit with what I've heard of elephants. I'm going to check." He walked over and grabbed hold of one of the elephant's thick legs. He came back to his friends. "I can hardly believe it, but an elephant is like a tree!"

"You must all be wrong," said the fourth blind man. He went over and felt the elephant's tail. "Now that's strange! An elephant feels very much like a rope."

All of the blind men were right and yet they all were wrong. They did not have the whole picture.

So too there were many opinions about what was happening on Palm Sunday. Some people saw the royal treatment Jesus was receiving. They heard people welcoming him as a king. They were happy about seeing royalty and expecting freedom from Roman rule.

Other people saw the parade and were carried away by the shouting and the waving of palm branches. It was a time for fun and celebrating.

Some people were there because they had heard about the prophecy that Jesus was fulfilling when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. They knew about his miracles. They wanted to worship him and show him respect.

The Pharisees saw a man they disliked. He was getting attention and they were upset. "Look at the way the people are treating him! It is disgusting the way he is getting all of that attention! What can we do to stop this?"

All of these people were right according to their own view, but none of them had the whole picture ...

Perhaps they only saw the part they wanted to see

- or perhaps what they did see they reacted against  
even today with the benefit of 2000 years  
to think and study and consider more carefully
- there is still much to ponder

Yet we do have an agreed starting point:

- welcoming Jesus as our Saviour  
walking together, following Jesus, even if as today's prayer says  
it leads to a cross
- for to welcome Jesus is to walk the way of the cross

I have more than a sneaking suspicion that part of the reason the "Hosannas!"

- turned to "Crucify!"  
is because Jesus did not do things the way people thought he should
- he was not the new King of Israel  
reclaiming the glory days of David and Solomon
- he did not instantly usher in a new era when everything would be made right  
through his miraculous powers
- he did not fit the religious leaders' criteria for "Messiah" in any way at all

In fact it seems more that Jesus was a miracle

- in a way that people were not even looking for  
yet still, as he did all those years ago  
we remember that Jesus enters the town
- our town, and it is just the beginning ...

Today, Palm Sunday, ushers in 'Holy Week'

- as we mark the events of Jesus final days, leading to his arrest, crucifixion and ...  
here is how one writer, Charles Rice, reflects on Holy Week:

Holy Week got started in Jerusalem as the early Christians became aware of the very places where Jesus walked, taught, suffered, and died. They wanted not so much to reenact as to connect – to enter into – those saving events by standing in the very places and reading the accounts of what happened there. More than remembering, more than reenactment they desired to participate in the saving presence of Christ. One way to achieve this, Christians have thought, is to keep Holy Week, to walk through the story of Jesus' Passion and death.

But what makes us truly rejoice is the knowledge that Jesus enters our town, comes to us in Mangawhai, Wellsford, Kaiwaka, Hakaru, Tomorata ... wherever people with the open hearts of children receive him, he comes. It is a matter not of wishing that we could have "been with him then" but of welcoming him with sincerity and abandon: "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

We still forget what he requires of us. It is all too easy to turn this whole day into nothing more than a showy parade, to forget what it means to follow Jesus on this way. The humble beast of burden that carried Jesus into the city can remind us of the lowly service to which we are called. Though we sometimes speak of this as the "triumphal entry," the unfolding events of the week, like the whole of Jesus' life, deliver us from notions of triumphalism.

Though Jesus is betrayed, through him God overcomes sin and death. There lies the importance of keeping Holy Week. Among the early Christians, Easter was celebrated as the "Great Three Days." Those early followers of Jesus did not separate the events of this week; they were all of a piece, beginning on this day filled with expectation and uncertainty. Jesus came to a town we recognize and to people we know all too well. But among them, and in spite of them, he walks toward the salvation that comes at Easter.

Today perhaps the real danger is not that people will see only the “froth and bubble”  
- of waving palms and cheering crowds  
and miss the reality of new life on Easter Day  
- the real danger is that people will not see Jesus at all  
that though we welcome him here, within the walls of our church  
welcome him into our lives  
- out there, people just won't see Jesus ...

Unless we make a fuss, a “festival of faith”  
- with palms, for the joyous celebration  
and a cross, for the sin which Jesus overcame to give us life  
- today we have both palms and the cross  
our mission is to make sure people get the picture  
and can see Jesus for themselves

As we enter Holy Week, walking again the way that leads to Good Friday and Easter  
- a concluding poem titled “Coronation March”

Listen!  
I hear a distant crowd  
shouting.  
What is it  
they are saying?  
I can't quite make it out  
over the clop, clop  
of donkey hooves on cobblestones.  
Ah, there it is,  
"Hosanna!"

Listen!  
I hear a distant crowd  
shouting.  
What is it they are screaming?  
I can't quite make it out  
over the clop, clop  
of hammer blows driving in the nails.  
Ah, there it is,  
"Crucify him!"

Listen!  
A crowd goes by once more  
in endless procession,  
and you and I are in the midst.  
And the world wonders,  
unable to hear our words.  
They watch our acts and wonder  
will it be a cross or a coronation. (Robin E. Van Cleef)

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.