

Sermon Palm Sunday 2015 with Baptism Nicholas Thompson

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

“When the procession left it had become a much more impressive spectacle for the people – adults, children in crowns and princess cloaks, labradors wearing Richard’s colours – now lining the narrow road. The procession was led by two knights herald in armour.

Tiny Dadington, usual population fewer than 300, was packed with more than 5,000 people. Many had walked there as miles of country roads were closed for the procession.

At the battlefield heritage centre so many people from all over the world applied for tickets that the website crashed.

On the outskirts of Leicester the streets were packed, with showers of white roses thrown onto the hearse.”

Human beings can never resist a good procession and a chance to come out onto the streets. This week thousands have done so for a King who died in 1485! Now many of those who were there may have gathered mainly out of curiosity or the abiding wish that we have to be part of history about which many of us know so little! We want to feel connected. Sometimes we need a chance to come and celebrate and show our feelings.

We will do so for sport. Streets not so far from here become thronged on the rare occasions that Arsenal Football Club wins cups and championships! On even rarer occasions I have been part of a crowd of tens of thousands who have greeted my own humble little team Reading when they won the Championship with a record number of points! At the close of the 2nd World War countless numbers of people poured on to the streets of this city to celebrate the end of fighting and the coming of peace.

Before the London Olympic Games in 2012 there was a 70 day odyssey of the Olympic flame through the length and breadth of the country. Again it passed through streets not so far from here no doubt. The journalist India Hicks wrote

this as it travelled through an impoverished part of London which not so long before had been caught up in riots and destruction.

“Last Thursday the torch finally arrived in my bit of London. It was 6.30am and I thought there would be maybe be 200 people watching, most of them children and pensioners. How wrong I was: the streets were crammed with thousands of people of all ages. We cheered ourselves hoarse and I wanted to cry.”

We today might not number thousands and we are not on the streets but we are gathered here today to celebrate with Cicely who has been baptised today. We are very pleased that she is part of our lives! She is a beautiful, little girl full of character and potential. She is part of her own nuclear family with Mark and Jenn and Miles and she is part of our wider family too. Her birth just before a time of real sadness and loss for us all was a real counterbalance to our loss. New life and new hope is always to be celebrated! And today we are welcoming her into the even larger family of the Church on earth and through the ages. We are celebrating Cicely’s belonging today to Jesus Christ. We are celebrating with her the hope that he brings to us today alongside the hope which he brought to people lining the road into Jerusalem all those years ago.

The crowd who welcomed Jesus on his entry into Jerusalem were riding high on a crest of hope and euphoria. Even in the brief words of Mark this comes through to us clearly. The news about Jesus, his teaching and healing – the transformation which he was bringing into peoples’ lives – and the peoples’ hopes for a national saviour seemed on the brink of fulfilment as he came out from the countryside in to the City. It was Passover time – freedom time! But it was more. This was the time when Passover dreams, the great hope of freedom, of God’s sovereign and saving presence being revealed in a quite new way, would at last come true.

So Jesus is welcomed because something new is happening. They spread their garments on the road and you don’t do that lightly – especially in the dusty, stony Middle East! This was done for royalty. They didn’t cut off the leafy branches from the fields because they felt a bit happy. This was done to welcome a King. 200 years before Judas Maccabaeus defeated the Syrian King Antiochus Epiphanes, entered Jerusalem and cleansed and rebuilt the Temple

– and people waved ivy and branches as they sang in celebration. Judas started a dynasty which lasted 100 years. The point Mark wants to make is clear. From Chapter 8 onwards the disciples have believed that Jesus is the true and rightful King of the Jews. This is the moment for his royal reception.

So they sing Hosanna. We sing it today but it's not commonly in our language as it's a Hebrew word. But it brings together a real sense of praise that we just cannot hold back with a prayer that God will save his people. It comes from Psalm 118 – which is all about going up to Jerusalem and the Temple - which we heard earlier and which Mark uses to answer the question as to who Jesus is. He is the one who is coming to make the Passover real. He is coming to save us, to release us from all that oppresses us and to heal us from all that harms us. He is coming to make the people whole.

And what next? Mark ends in anti-climax. Jesus goes from the celebration in to the Temple, has a look round, comes out again and heads off to Bethany where he is to stay with his followers. There is a pause.

Palm Sunday is an upbeat day. And next Sunday – Easter Day – is even more so. But what lies in between? We stand on the threshold of Holy Week and the betrayal, arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. The man who is welcomed as a King will soon be humiliated and destroyed. Richard the 3rd whom we welcomed this week with such acclaim was last processed through the country and the streets naked and bloodied slung over a horse.

The shout Hosanna soon turns to crucify.

We welcome Jesus today in to the totality of our lives and experience – in to our hopes and fears and deepest anxieties – in to our world with all its promise and in its worst brokenness - and we can pray that he will transform us.

The crowd sensed something deep and life-changing in Jesus as he rode into town. They could not know the danger into which he was riding too and that his work was to be completed on a cross where his love for the world would change everything.

But we can know that and as we have prayed for Cicely today in her baptism and celebrated the love of Christ alive in her life so we can pray for that too in our own lives and through the world. Amen