



ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Palm Sunday – 5th April 2020

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In parish ministry I always found the Palm Sunday Eucharist the most complicated to plan and organise. There was the challenge of the Palm Procession from the lychgate, through the churchyard and into the Church, singing that ancient wonderful hymn, *All glory, laud and honour*. Ready for the service to begin, everyone was settled in their pews and had to be uprooted to gather outside - often in the cold and the wind, sometimes in the pouring rain! Then there was the search for volunteers to take part in the dramatic reading of The Passion.

As these two liturgical acts take up a fair amount of time, some feel the sermon can be omitted. This on the grounds that the emotional drama of the solemn reading of the Passion has a message in itself. One year I omitted the sermon and the Churchwarden complained that, "I hadn't earned my crust!".

This year, with the suspension of all Palm Processions and Solemn Readings of the Passion, we can perhaps reflect ourselves on the Gospel whilst leaving the Passion Reading to speak for itself. Instead, let's consider this: how does the Palm Procession fit into the whole of Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Day?

The wonderful traditional hymn, *All glory, laud and honour* is perhaps a good place to start. The original Latin version, *Gloria, Laus et honor*, goes back to St Theodulf, bishop of Orleans from 789 to 818. He wrote it while in prison at Angers, after being deposed by King Louis the Pious. In its early form the hymn had thirty nine verses - suitable for long Palm Sunday Processions. The English

version we use today was written by the great 19th century hymnologist, J.M. Neale, and included in the first edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861. Present versions are usually five verses long, with the first verse as a refrain. For long procession nine verse formats are available.

The words have a simple beauty: *Thou art the King of Israel, David's royal Son, The company of angels, The people of the Hebrews* They capture the spirit and imagery of Jesus on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Simply reading the words, rather than singing them, can become a prayer for Palm Sunday.

Thou didst accept their praises: it may seem that the crowd's Hosannas were a general, spontaneous and involuntary response as Jesus casually rode into Jerusalem. But the first three evangelists are clear: this was an event rich in symbolism and deliberately orchestrated by Jesus himself when he asked for two disciples to find him a donkey. It was to be a humble yet triumphant entrance into the holy city. But it was at the same time to be a messianic entrance, reflecting the Old Testament prophecy of Zachariah 14.4 where the victorious king would stand on the Mount of Olives to defeat the nations who had captured Jerusalem. That messianic entrance to the city was to be from the east, over the Mount of Olives. This contrasted clearly with what would have been the entrance of Pilate and other Roman governors who traditionally entered from a western gate. Jesus' messianic entrance was to be humble and peaceful in contrast to the violent conquering entrance of the Roman emperor or his generals. But his Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem was also to be much more.

By the manner in which he organised his ride into Jerusalem, Jesus shows that this was to be the crucial week of his life. The full meaning and purpose of his life and ministry were coming to a head. In his messianic entry into Jerusalem Jesus was fulfilling his mission with meaning and purpose. The events at the climax of the coming week were to show the true nature of the Messiah, even if this was not to be the Messiah the Jewish authorities of his day had in mind.

Jesus knew this was to be the fulfilment of his life and mission. But how much did he know of what was to actually happen? All the synoptic gospels are convinced that he did know, certainly in broad outline. Mark and Luke each give three detailed predictions, while Matthew has four, the final one being after his entry into Jerusalem. At the beginning of Chapter 26, Matthew's account of the

Passion tells us: *When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'*

Many biblical scholars would have us believe that the detailed predictions of the evangelists were written in the light of the events. The fact that there are so many, and almost in a repetitious pattern could support this. Whatever the case may be, there can be no doubt that Jesus did warn those close to him that things would get difficult and come to a violent end. Perhaps after all that had happened, the evangelists filled in the details. Yet it is certain that Jesus knew the crunch time was rapidly approaching. Despite his words of desolation on the cross, he knew that God would not finally desert him: he would be vindicated. Jesus, as the Messiah, entered Jerusalem with determination and confidence.

We are all living in a time that requires determination and confidence. As Jesus organised his journey into Jerusalem, we need to organise the journey of our lives in this challenging time. It takes prayerful determination and organisation to live our lives as the present circumstances demand. We all have a full part to play according to our own situations and responsibilities.

As we go through Holy Week and come closer to the Cross and the Resurrection, perhaps we can renew our Lenten resolutions, and look at the meaning and pattern of our lives. We could reflect upon how and where we can die to the old ways of our lives, and where we can rise to a new way of life, not only in these present critical times, but also when life gets back to some kind of normality.

May the Holy Spirit guide us in our thoughts and prayers.

Amen.