

Sunday 5th April 2020
Matthew 21.1-11

‘Two Processions’

It's odd today to be talking about crowds as this has been the Lent when we've given up being in any. Yet Palm Sunday has a crowd there at the centre of the story shouting hosanna and waving branches in a royal welcome.

Palm Sunday - what did the crowd make of it, what did Jesus mean by it and how do we understand it?

Jesus rides a donkey – sometimes used by Israel's royalty in days gone by, but more recently just a humble beast of burden. Nevertheless, asses and donkeys were so valued in the Jewish tradition that in Deuteronomy 5 there's a special instruction to give them a Sabbath – one day off in seven. I think the Sidmouth Donkey Sanctuary would be proud.

Jesus never speaks of The Kingdom of God in terms of power and I suspect he would have been uncomfortable calling this arrival in Jerusalem his Triumphal Entry.

So much of this coming week we call Holy is about Jesus challenging our assumptions about faith, especially the way we sometimes package it into religion and ritual. His radical teaching rocked the status quo so much that his destiny wasn't to be given an honoured

seat in the Temple but an horrendous cross at Calvary.

During these unusual days I guess many of us are spending some time looking again at what's important to us on our own faith journeys. There are times, and perhaps this is one of them, when we are prompted to let go of some of our stale understandings of God and open our minds to new insights borne, perhaps, of the struggles and confusions of life. This isn't wavering, but maturing faith.

Everyone in the Palm Sunday crowd had to make an individual journey. Could they move in their understanding of the one to whom they shouted Hosanna. Could they, and can we, see faith not so much in terms of power but service?

This week Pope Francis stood in an empty St Peter's Square praying for the world. It was a moving sight.

When he became the Bishop of Rome that same square was filled with 150,000 people and they heard the Pope say, and these are his words: *Let us never forget that authentic power is service.*

Two days later, at another crowd filled occasion, this time in Canterbury Cathedral, Justin Welby became Archbishop. In a novel start to that service he was greeted at The West Door by a seventeen-year-old girl who asked him: Who are you and why do you request entry? To which he responded: I am Justin, a servant of

Jesus Christ, and I come as one seeking the grace of God to travel with you in his service together.

Over these last few weeks we have seen so much selfless and sacrificial service amongst us, especially by all those working with such devotion in our hospitals, the scientists working at breakneck speed to develop new breathing machines and a vaccine, alongside many in our communities simply looking out for others every day.

In what may seem like the worst of times we can discover the best of ourselves. And for that we are truly grateful.

In their book *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan talk about Palm Sunday and they make the point that on that day there were actually two processions taking place.

One they characterise as the Peasant Procession that Jesus was leading, coming down the Mount of Olives making its way into Jerusalem for Passover.

The other came from The West – as it did on this day every year and it was the Imperial Procession. At its head was Pontius Pilate, Roman governor, just come up from his usual more conducive seaside residence of Caesarea Maritima, leading a column of cavalry and soldiers. Come up to supervise Passover.

Two very different processions.

The Peasant Procession was Jesus-led and was perhaps viewed by onlookers as a rag tale bunch proclaiming the Kingdom of God. The Imperial Procession was proclaiming the power of the Empire. They couldn't have been more different. And it was those two processions converging on the holy city of Jerusalem that set the context for the conflict that would ultimately ensue and result in Jesus being crucified.

One procession was about power led by Pilate, the other one was about service led by Jesus.

Which procession will we join, and which leader will we follow this Palm Sunday?