

To march or not to march?
Isaiah 50:4-9a, Matthew 21:1-11

29th March 2026

To go on peaceful demonstrations, taking part in marches for one cause or another, are very much the order of the day nowadays. The news media is full of them. But, of course, it always has been the order of the day in democratic societies, where it is a free and acceptable way for people to express their views in this manner. And given the current volatile international situation, when missiles are fired, bombs are exploding, drone attacks are mounted in more than one country, it is understandable that feelings are running high even in countries, like ours, which are not directly affected by these wars. Through the news media we are seeing the affects of these conflicts as they happen. So marches and demonstrations do occur and they don't always remain peaceful. The police may get involved, people get arrested and charged. And as we heard at our church meeting last Sunday, even churches and church people are not exceptions when these things get out of control. So much so, that our Provincial Synod deemed it necessary to debate the matter and formulate resolutions trying to safeguard the interests of clergy demonstrators. But we also know that it has been a question for a lot of other church folk too to decide whether to go on a march, or not, whether to show their solidarity with the many thousands of innocent victims of war.

One thing that has always puzzled me about these events is, how it is possible to tell so accurately the number of people attending. They always appear in the news as '500 strong demonstration, or, as many as 20,000 were present'. So, I was puzzled that is, until my IT savvy family members enlightened me. Apparently, it is to do with the mobile phones people have on them. Once you operate a mobile phone, you are known and you can be counted. As simple, as that! Well, of course, none of this high tech monitoring was available in Jesus' time. So no accurate recording took place on that first Palm Sunday morning. But what we can be sure of is, that it was not a huge march numbering thousands. For if it was, the pretty efficient Imperial 'monitoring system' would have crushed it even before it reached Jerusalem without recourse to mobile phones or such like.

After all, the city was getting ready for the Jewish Passover celebrations and the Roman forces were also getting ready to deal with any disturbances that might follow. But some country preacher riding on a donkey didn't seem to present any serious risk to public order. Well, it just goes to show that seeing is not the same as understanding. The Roman authorities' view was based on what they saw. But, the same sight meant something quite different to the cheering crowds; the crowds who have been suffering under those same authorities with mounting desperation and increasing expectations for the arrival of a liberator.

For them and for Jesus' followers the whole scene was laden with signs. Jesus starts at the Mount of Olives, the very place from which the long-expected Messiah, God's own Anointed Leader would arrive according to the old prophecies. (*Zech 14:4*). He is riding a donkey into Jerusalem, which has its particular message, again echoing widely held Messianic expectations from the prophet Zechariah, among others:

*"Daughter of Zion, rejoice with all your heart...
See, your King is coming to you...
humble and mounted on a donkey...
his rule will extend... to the ends of the earth"*

(*Zech 9:9*).

And how would the authorities know about the Great King Solomon, son of David, who had also ridden on a donkey, his father's own mule, to his coronation. (*1 Kings 1:32-37*). So, here is another Son of David coming to claim his kingdom. Hence the shouts: '*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*' For them he is not merely a country preacher, he is a King in the making, who deserves all the adulation due to royalty. He will put an end to the Roman domination and usher in God's Kingdom.

The irony of the situation is that both of these perceptions miss the point. Jesus and his purposes are misunderstood by his enemies as well as his friends. And has not this been true ever since, all through the greater part of Christian history? His enemies have either dismissed him as harmless or persecuted his followers as enemies of the state. And his friends, well certainly some of them, made him into a kind of King, who would require humble worshippers rather than brave followers ready to transform the world.

So that is the permanent challenge of Palm Sunday. Where do we stand in all this? What do we think is happening here? Would we join Jesus' march, or not? And if we did, what would we expect of him? Would he fulfil our expectations and needs?

Someone shared with me a story about a conductor of a symphony orchestra, who gave a kind of pre-concert lecture about the pieces the orchestra was going to play. The conductor asked the audience to listen out for unexpected, surprising turns in the music. Sometimes the musical score would take a fair number of jarring, unexpected twists and there would be points when the blare of the trumpet or the sudden rolling of the timpani would seem to come out of nowhere in a surprising fashion. Yet in hearing the piece as a whole; from start to finish, all these surprises would be brought together, they would make sense, and produce such a feeling of coherence, that by the time of its conclusion, it was clear that it couldn't have happened in any other way.

In a sense this is how it works with Jesus. If people made judgments about him merely on the basis of an odd tableau of his life, like the Palm Sunday events, no wonder that they were bitterly disappointed when within a few days their hero was brutally executed. To make sense of it all you have to look at Jesus' story in its entirety. Matthew the Gospel writer is helping us to do that with the positioning of the Palm Sunday entry between other noteworthy events. Before it comes some challenging teaching about servant leadership and the healing of two blind men on the Jericho road. And after it comes the cleansing of the Temple. There Jesus confronts – not the Roman authorities as some hoped – but his own faith tradition and chastises the temple authorities for their distortions of the meaning of those faith traditions. Then he proceeds to heal more needy people. Looking at it this way, it becomes clear that in the disappointment of the crowds and in the anger of the Temple authorities, there are enough excuses for the Imperial power to bring about the fatal events of Good Friday.

I posed the question earlier what do we expect of Jesus. Well, as I talk to people in our church family, and in my own family too, the most often discussed topics are to do with health issues. I know it's to do with our demographics, but all the same, it is a serious concern for a lot of us. We exchange views

about our loss of hearing, our cataract operations, our prescription glasses and sometimes about our deep sorrow over the loss of loved ones. When I read our OT Bible passage for today I was struck by the way it seems to touch on some of the same issues. It comes from the Book of Isaiah, from one of the so-called 'servant songs', that the early Christians understood as a kind of mirror, in which they recognised the face of Jesus Christ. It talks about the tongue of the servant, which was given to him so that he may console the sad and the weary with a timely word. It talks about the ears of the servant, his hearing that is made sharp to hear and follow the instructions of his master and so on. If this is how we see him, then I think, we may safely entrust him with all these problems that lay heavily on our hearts without fearing that they may be inappropriate on a day like Palm Sunday.

But it also gives us the opportunity to think about the meaning of truly following our Lord in practical terms. It means to use all *our* God-given faculties in God's service, as he did. To use our tongues to comfort those who are sad and to support those who are weak; Our ears, for listening carefully to God's instructions so that we may not go astray and to listen to others so that we may understand each other better; Our eyes to see the suffering and injustices in our society and see what we can do about it.

In other words, it gives us the opportunity to look beyond the pomp and circumstance of Palm Sunday lest we may be tempted to see it as a show of earthly power and authority and claim some of it to ourselves as followers of Christ. The picture of the Servant is a great antidote to that. It helps us to see that Jesus still comes to us as a Servant. Sometimes it may be difficult to see him clearly because of the palm branches and the worshipping crowds. But God's grace is still revealed most eloquently in powerlessness and service and that is what we give thanks for on this Palm Sunday and take away with us into Holy Week. **Amen**

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