

Palm Sunday 2013

Introduction

Did you happen to see St Peter's Square in Rome at the point when there'd been the white smoke, but nobody knew who the new Pope was yet? I was away from home. I could watch a BBC continuous live webcast of it, but I don't know what you all saw on an ordinary television - whether it bounced the normal schedule or not?

There were several shots of excited young nuns, bouncing up and down. One of them looked as though she was actually chewing her rosary. Somebody said there was between 100,000 and 150,000 people there. There weren't anything like that many people welcoming Jesus on the original Palm Sunday. But they were excited.

Like Christmas, Palm Sunday is almost too familiar. We know the story. How can we walk alongside Jesus and still feel challenged in a new way?

How do you imagine it? When I try to picture it, it feels fierce, frightening, diffused with a glaring, garish, uncomfortable light, shouting, jostling, the smell of animals and human sweat, an atmosphere of threatening intensity.

Yet when I try to imagine Jesus, he seems to be in the centre, sitting on his donkey with a strange interior pain and stillness, which nobody else is able to see.

But, unlike those in Jerusalem that day, we know what happens next. We know that in human terms, this is going to turn out badly. I think that skews my imagination, rewrites my mental picture. Those who were there, didn't know this

If we try to think ourselves into where they were, we can learn something important. They thought this was their king coming into his own. They were expecting a Messiah who was going to claim his kingdom, overthrow the Romans and make everything right. And 'they' wasn't just a crowd of bystanders. 'They' includes the disciples. And that's important - they hadn't understood. They didn't get it.

- Life was wrong
- people were hungry
- people were sick
- they'd seen Jesus feed and heal them. SO
- They were expecting a political solution - liberation theology if you like;
- They thought that was what they needed.
- They thought that everything was going to be fantastic. SO
 - They were projecting onto Jesus all their various hopes.
 - They saw the Jesus they wanted, not who he actually was. AND
 - this is important -
 - They both wanted and expected a Jesus who would do it all for them - seize power and dole out the goodies,
 - They weren't going to have to do anything. They would bask in his kingdom.

20 ... the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. 21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." Matt 20: 20-21 NRSV

It was going so well. This man had more powers than Superman. They knew he could do it. **Is that your picture of Jesus, by the way?**

Do you wonder why he didn't, and doesn't, just sort everything out, zap it all? On those terms, it all went so horribly wrong.

We all puzzle about what drove Judas. One of the theories is that Judas betrayed Jesus when he suddenly realised that Jesus wasn't going to deliver what Judas was hoping for. Jesus was not the

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person Judas had projected onto him.

When Jesus is arrested, Peter leaps to his defence. He cuts off Malchus's ear. Jesus says,

"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" Matt 26:51 NRSV

Obviously, he could - but he doesn't. Likewise, the chief priests taunt Jesus as he is dying on the cross,

"He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him." Matt 27:37 NRSV

Again, obviously, he could - but he doesn't. Jesus is not the person we expect him to be. God is not the sort of God we'd invent if we were going to have the temerity to do so.

Nor - when things are puzzling - does he do things our way. We cannot call him to order, expect him to deliver. We have to accept him on his terms.

Some things that follow

Now of course, we know - because we've been told, that Jesus had to die. Otherwise,

54 ... how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" Matt 27:54 NRSV

And if he did not die, our sins would not be forgiven and he could not rise from the dead. But certain other things follow from this.

1. Jesus's answer to the human condition isn't the one we might have chosen, or thought we wanted. The disciples and the crowd wanted the sort of Messiah who would seize power and deliver the kingdom in this world, then, that week.

Do we expect Justin Welby, Pope Francis or whoever, to do the same? Do we then feel let down when they don't.

- When there is yet another childcare scandal,
- when several children are burnt to death in Derby,
- or Jimmy Savile is found to have abused children,

is it somehow the fault of the government, the council, the BBC, the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, or even the neighbours - rather than the person who actually did it.

2. If you think of the hymn we sang, He humbled himself, *"Obediently he bowed his neck ~ and on a cross he died."* - as low as you can get. So *"God has raised him up"*. He has risen from the dead. He came down, down, down, that he can go up, up, up - and take us with him. The Fathers say that which God did not assume, He does not heal. But he does not sort out the world's problems, either at world level or home level. If we expect him to, that is the error people were making on Palm Sunday. It's asking the wrong question, and then complaining when he doesn't give us the answer we want.

3. Finally, have you ever had an experience like the people on Palm Sunday? You thought, 'this is where the LORD is taking us - the wind of the Holy Spirit is in our sails'. Only for it all to come to nothing - your dream falls apart - and you don't understand Obviously this is not comparable with having your leader seized and executed. But that doesn't stop it from being hard.

Hang on in there. Don't be discouraged. The crucifixion was a terrible thing, But Jesus makes it very clear, repeatedly, that it had to happen. It was not some dreadful mistake. The people that greeted Jesus with palms were hoping for an improved version of Judea without the Romans.

The result from Easter onwards has been far more exciting than that.