

Palm Sunday Sermon 2024 (DC)

Philippians 2 v5-11 Mark 11 v1-11

Beyond the Personality Cult

It's Palm Sunday, a day when we mark Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the final days before his crucifixion and resurrection. It's a joyful start to Easter week, with its bittersweet messages of our faith. In the days ahead we quietly and thoughtfully reflect, we feel the dreadful sadness of the crucifixion and we joyfully celebrate that Christ is risen from the dead in a week's time. It's one of our great festivals of the Christian church worldwide.

Already today we have marked it by prayer walks in our parish to reflect that Palm Sunday is all about the wider people joining in saluting Christ as King as he entered into Jerusalem. Cries of Hosanna reverberated as the donkey carrying Christ processed up the street, with the adulation of crowds waving palm fronds and laying their cloaks on the ground.

As we told the story to the fantastic pupils of Worsley bridge school this week, I couldn't help but feel what a strange and almost alien story it is to a generation, largely not brought up with the Bible and worship at church. Albeit some were pretty clued up and the questions were at times penetrating. Forgive me, but I can't help but reimagine it in terms of how it would happen today. Perhaps Christ would be on the back of a builder's pickup truck. The palms would be replaced by smart phones being waived with their torches on. Everyone would be taking a selfie as Christ passed in the background, tik tok and Instagram would be awash with postings and the news channels would be in overdrive. The historical context different, but the fundamental messages would be the same. Someone important is arriving who the people adore.

In that entry to Jerusalem, there were actually two fundamental messages going on. One from Christ to the people, and one the other way round from the people to him. One divine, the other human.

To illustrate the point, I thought I might have a bit of picture quiz. I'm going to put up some pictures of people who have a bit of a personality cult around them. Their followers adore them, they will hang onto every word, phones will be waived and their actions will be influenced. Let's see how many you recognise?

Donald Trump/Taylor Swift/ Mary Berry/ Andrew Tate/Jesus Christ

You might say, 'Come on David, how can you put Jesus in the company of the others? - Mary Berry perhaps, but Donald Trump and Andrew Tate!

But that is my point. My talk today is entitled 'Beyond the Personality Cult.' In every walk of life, it is the human condition that we have cults of the personality. In politics, in culture and entertainment, in sport, in work, even in churches. Blind following of personalities can lead to problems. Even within the church our safeguarding training makes us all too familiar with the abuses of Bishop Ball or more recently Mike Pilavachi of Soul Survivor. One can also note

the Apostle Paul's teaching in Corinthians about us not casting allegiance to strong personalities and wrong teachings.

My heart is saddened by those leaders who currently think their determination of what the Scriptures say or mean leads them to believe that they should be out of communion with those who have a different interpretation and they wish to lead others to schism within the church. But that's a bit of an aside.

In the cult of the personality, we suspend our natural awareness or even judgement of what is being said or done. Things are accepted, followed or even copied because of our trust and belief in the person. Sometimes it's a position of authority or sometimes personal charisma, put the two together and it magnifies potential trouble – which is not to say everyone in leadership with charisma will fall into the trap of abusing their position. Far from it, but the antidote is not falling into the trap and suspending our awareness and evaluation of what is going on around us. True for every walk of life and faith.

So how does this link to Palm Sunday?

The story of the crowds welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem is so familiar, yet our understanding and interpretation of it is dominated by the fact that as Christians we know what came next. We already know the spoiler. Do we join in the Hosannas - or shall we condemn the fickleness of the crowd who within a week would be calling for their erstwhile hero to be crucified?

I mentioned at the beginning that there were two messages going on. One from Christ to the people, and one the other way round from the people to him. One divine, the other human.

What was the message that Christ was delivering. Part of that we find in Paul's explanation to the Philippian Christians - our first reading.

Christ being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

Here is someone who is not grasping for, or displaying, coercive human power. Rather someone coming to serve. But more amazingly this is not just 'someone' but God himself, part of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Christ's message was to arrive for a triumphal entry riding the foal of a donkey, yes a fulfilment of an ancient prophecy, but primarily a direct statement of humility and not worldly kingship. If he was coming as a worldly king it would have been in fine chariot, stallion or ornate camel, or an open top bus or state carriage. His point was that the Kingship of heaven is entirely different. This is the humility we too are expected to exhibit. In the world but not of it.

But perhaps the crowds were in the market for something else. At worst they totally misunderstood the concept of Christ being the long-awaited Messiah. At best they sort of understood but got swayed otherwise afterwards. They conflated the divine purpose of Christ on earth with the worldly desire to be rid of the occupying Romans, the corrupt rulers,

the oppression of systematic religious rules, the sheer struggle with life. They saw and felt hope, but it was a hope based on a Human giving delivery to the woes of their lives. Let's face it, even the disciples struggled to see the picture we now know. This was their message to Christ, they wanted a human King for human things, who would do their bidding.

Palm Sunday marks that tension, which comes when we view Christ more in humanity than divinity. We potentially start joining the cult of the personality rather than working to discern the divine. It's just so easy for us to suspend our awareness and evaluation and go for the superficial or human definition.

We know that within the week many of those crowds were calling for Christ to be crucified, his divine kingship not understood and not wanted. It doesn't take us long to see how quickly the bubble of the cult of the personality can be burst. That was the trial and crucifixion of Good Friday.

Palm Sunday is the beginning of Easter with the events that are at the heart of our faith, Christ's death on the cross, his self-sacrifice for all the sins of the world and of course his resurrection and power over all that is evil, including death itself.

Let's not kid ourselves; these divine things are not easy for us as humans to fully understand. Recounting the story of Easter to the youngsters of Worsley bridge school this week highlighted just how at odds with the current world the story of Easter is, as I said to Alison on the way home one day. It's a bit of a tall story isn't it, when you look at it, to those with no knowledge is all a bit weird in human terms.

How good it was to hear some of the questions. How did Jesus actually get out of the tomb, who rolled the stone away, how did Jesus come back to life again? Here were young minds grappling with the difference between human and divine.

Can we answer all these questions, can we fully understand the divinity of God and the nature his Kingdom. Can I let you into a secret if you have not discovered the answer yourself already. It's absolutely OK not to fully understand and be able to explain everything of God. Our last hymn today will capture that, each verse starts with the phrase 'I cannot tell how or why'. And the second half of each verse begins with 'but this I know'. We cannot comprehend everything of God, but we know enough to trust him and follow him. It's a fantastic hymn, a fantastic sentiment.

We know the disciples had problems enough in understanding. There's that great bit in John's gospel where *'some of the disciples said to one another, what does it mean by saying 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then in a little while you will see me' and 'because I am going to the father. They kept asking. 'What does it mean by a little while? We don't understand what he is saying'.*

We are not alone in not understanding everything. There's always a bit of a struggle as to how hard we try to discern God's word. In the letter to the Hebrews attributed to Paul he writes in rather exasperated tone. *'We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk.*

Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Now he was writing to the Hebrews and not St Paul's, so let's not go on a guilt trip, but there is a fair pointthat we should desire to move on from the simple stuff of faith into greater understanding. In other words as individuals and as a church we should be trying to grow in our faith.

If we don't understand everything we should not fall back on the unquestioning nature of the cult of the personality and give up trying. Rather we have a personal relationship with our God, who we are called to constantly know better. It's through times of prayer and spiritual reflection, of searching for the nature of God that he reveals more of himself to us. There are loads of time to do that together over Easter with Compline reflections this Monday to Wednesday nights, Our Maundy Thursday meal and Holy Communion and of course our reflections at the cross on good Friday. There will be times be times when we can do it privately too throughout our lives.

So to sum up, what are the Palm Sunday messages we have been considering today.

Firstly, Christ's triumphal entry to Jerusalem was one of divine humility not of human kingship. Our lives are to reflect that humility. Praise him for his divinity and not for our human needs.

Secondly, we should not get ensnared by human cults of the personality that makes us follow people of power and influence rather than Christ's teachings. We should not switch off evaluating what is being said and done around us. Our fixed points need to be Christ centred. He is the One True God.

Finally, let's be honest and acknowledge that we struggle to understand everything of God, but we can we respond with 'but this I do know' and Let's create time to reflect and pray with him. As we ponder these things he will reveal even more of his heavenly majesty to us.

Amen

I want to major on how the crowd one minute are crying Hosana and calling Jesus King, and then a few days later calling for him to be crucified. Looking at the fickleness of the human condition being swayed by attractive personalities and movements and projecting our own desires onto them. The desire for everything to be clear cut. Seeing what is meant by being fed meat rather than baby food. How Christ's entry into Jerusalem is not a moment for superficial thinking but one of deep meaning about the Godliness of Jesus alongside the humanity - and how it will be further revealed through Easter week. I want to address that it's OK not to understand everything - that holding things in tension or uncertainty is preferable to dogmatic certainty. An ability to disagree agreeably. Pondering and searching for the full meaning of Easter is OK. It's during that pondering and searching that God reveals things of himself to us.