

Palm Sunday 2020 – Sermon for West Hereford Neil Patterson

In our reading from Matthew 21, one word leaps out even more than usual at the moment – “crowds.” Crowds that spread their cloaks before the donkey, that followed Jesus, that shouted ‘Hosanna!’ and said among themselves that he was a prophet. I feel certain you will have heard Palm Sunday sermons before now that point out that in only a few days’ time the same crowds will be shouting “crucify him!” And if we think of the Holy Week liturgies that we would normally be celebrating, we ourselves shout both ‘Hosanna’ and ‘Crucify’ as we accept that we too are part by nature of the fickle crowd, that our mood too can be easily swayed as we fail to resist the temptation to join in the popular opinion.

Your own thoughts about crowds will of course vary – some will be enthused by joining a throng whilst others prefer a bit more space and quiet – but whatever our temperament, for now we are deprived of crowds, keeping Holy Week in our own homes with our families. I hope you are connecting in all sorts of ways, but I suspect even those who like me are having to endure large Zoom meetings will agree that they are a poor substitute for really being together, and sensing the mood of a group. As humans we need to be with others, and miss the crowds. Most of all, I suspect you miss the crowd that is a congregation at worship, renewing your identity as children of God in song and prayer.

What we know, though, is that as he moved towards his Passion Jesus was ever more alone – first the cheering crowds melted away, leaving him only with the faithful disciples to keep the Passover. Then into Gethsemane with the three who could not keep awake to pray, and finally taken alone before the Sanhedrin and Pilate. In the end, it was only he who was called to bear the sins of all, and in his mortal flesh alone could the divine life enter into suffering to deliver the world. In the same way each of us in the end must wrestle with ourselves as we travel with God through life, and no-one else can truly judge how another stands with their Maker. There is a higher demand in holding firm in oneself without the encouraging sway of the crowd, or especially in resisting it in the name of what is right.

It may seem, especially perhaps in the moving rites of Holy Week, that our shared participation does something to break down our individualism, which is on the whole something to be led away from as we grow spiritually. But I wonder whether in fact there is not always an important amount of space to be left for the varieties of personal response. I recall as a curate that we wanted to introduce the Veneration of the Cross on Good Friday, but there was some unease around the rubric that those approaching should kiss the cross. I suggested we could just put "touch or kiss" and see what happened. And, as many of you will perhaps have witnessed, people made their veneration in different but equally powerful ways – kissing, grasping, resting their heads on the wood, or simply looking on prayerfully without leaving their seats. Together we worshipped, but each recognising and respecting one another's particular expressions of love for our Saviour.

Keeping Holy Week and Easter apart, as we shall this year, will no doubt be difficult for most, and painful for some. But I suggest there is a real spiritual gain in facing the challenge, to keep the days in one's own time and space, assisted no doubt by the texts and prayers sent out on behalf of our churches, but depending more than normal on our own self-discipline and faithfulness. Online the temptations of trivial chat and armchair shopping will be only a click away. We shall not have the enclosing walls of stone to keep out the distractions of the world, nor the imagery to lift our hearts, nor the uncomfortable pew to prompt us to our knees. But Jesus went to his Cross without support, his friends fled and the crowds turned hostile – and had to draw on the strength within himself.

Our journey is not the same – one of the things to remember every Holy Week is that he suffered all this so that we need not do so – and we can and should draw on his Spirit in our isolation and frustration. And we know that like as the pains of Holy Week do reach and end, so will our current endurance. The fickle throngs of Jerusalem are not the only crowds that matter in Scripture. For in the end we trust to find our way at last, through the Lord's cross, to join 'that great multitude which no man can number' who worship before the throne. There we shall know in full the love of God, and there we shall be alone no more.