

Palm (Passion) Sunday, Year C

We have just read the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. He was quite deliberately acting out a scene that had happened over 500 years earlier. When the Jews returned from captivity in Babylon, a prince of David's line called Zerubbabel was appointed as governor by the Persian king to administer the province of Judah. As governor he was not permitted to ride a horse, but had to ride a donkey to signify humble submission to the king of Persia. The prophet Zechariah was looking forward to the procession when he would enter the newly re-consecrated Temple, and he hoped that the prince would be God's Messiah. Things did not turn out that way, but his prophecy was later taken up as a promise that would be fulfilled when the real Messiah finally came.

In re-enacting this procession, Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah. The Gospel is charged with excitement, as the people jubilantly welcome their Messiah with words taken from Psalm 118, words chanted on the feast that commemorated the dedication of the temple. They are expecting God at last to intervene and liberate them.

As you know, the scene ends in a terrible anti-climax. Jesus found the religious institution symbolised by the temple to be not a vehicle of grace but a barrier to it. He was forced to empty it. This is our final chance as we begin Holy Week to ask him to cleanse away whatever in our hearts is a barrier to grace. More importantly, we are asked to take a good look at the institution of the church, especially as it is lived in our local community. Are we as a church an instrument of grace to those outside and a way of holiness for those within. If not, Jesus will have to do to us what he did to the temple.

The other anti-climax is that the crowd who welcomed Jesus with such enthusiasm became just as enthusiastic in calling for his crucifixion. That our following of Jesus might be more sincere, the Church asks us to listen today to the Passion Story. Surely it will move us to gratitude and love and a renewal of faith and commitment. As in imagination we walk the way of the cross with him let us hear him speaking to us (words borrowed from Bede North msc):

'My friends – yes, that is what you are – my friends.
My life was not complete till I crowned it with my death.
You must complete my death with your life.
Accept each moment as it comes to you with faith and trust.
Do not look for me in empty tombs or far off places.
I am in you.
I am in your neighbour.
I am in your home, your office, your factory, your schoolroom.
Wherever you are, I am there with you.
As you leave this church, take up your cross and follow me.
Complete the way of the cross we have walked together today'.