

St. Paul's Small Groups. March 16th 2008

An Easter People: Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

We don't know whether the taking of the animals was pre-arranged by Jesus or not, or whether He just knew they would be there and available. It's also possible that they were simply *requisitioned*, as Rabbis and royalty had the right to do. But Jesus is very clear in His instructions to the disciples. He didn't *have* to enter Jerusalem on a donkey at all (most pilgrims going up to Jerusalem arrived on foot). But Jesus is making a statement, setting Himself up as the King of the Jews, fulfilling the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9, and in His actions challenging the authorities to deal with His Messianic claims. Many in the crowd would have understood this, as their response shows. Matthew's version of Zech 9:9 emphasises the gentleness of Jesus' kingship against the popular mis-conceptions of the Messiah as a warrior king. The people call out to greet Jesus: the word Hosanna, which literally means "save us," had become used in praise rather than as a literal prayer by this time. This was their Saviour, not a warrior King-type saviour but a Saviour from sin. The people were praising Jesus and welcoming Him as someone sent from God. Some there clearly recognized that He could be the Messiah, that's what implied by the words, "Son of David". The phrase, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord", is a Q from Ps 118, which is one of the psalms used by pilgrims on their approach to Jerusalem for festivals.

The crowd (v 8) is very large: something special is happening. Most people are just *looking*, watching, seeing Jesus arriving in the distance, wondering what He is like. Everyone is shouting, but no-one in the crowd stands out. To be part of the crowd welcoming Jesus can be GOOD, in that we can be bolstered by each other's faith, and take comfort from a shared belief. It can be like that for us on a Sunday morning: at times when things are hard and we may not be able to say declare our faith for ourselves, we are lifted up by the faith of those around us. That's why it can be good to use the "we" forms of creed: **We believe in God, the Father Almighty etc.** We are part of a family who believes and who will support us when we are finding faith difficult.

But being part of a crowd like the Palm Sunday morning one can also be a BAD thing, in that we can *remain* on the sidelines and not get personally involved, not actually meet Jesus.


Look at the crowd in Jerusalem later that day (v.10-11). Jesus to them was merely a prophet.

Look at the crowd in Gethsemane Thursday evening (Mat 26:47) and on the Friday morning (Mat 27:20-22). They used their strength in numbers to do the work of the religious authorities and to condemn Jesus.

So what can we learn from these crowds in Holy Week, as we prepare for Easter? The GOOD things about being part of a crowd – or part of a large congregation – are that we can support each other's faith, feel the excitement of what God is doing and learn from each other. We can help each other be brave and strong. But the BAD aspects of being part of a crowd – or part of a large congregation – are that we can *remain* on the sidelines and not get personally involved. We can misunderstand or allow truths to be watered down; we can respond to the wrong influences and not think things through for ourselves. We can avoid a personal encounter with Jesus.

There was no crowd at the resurrection. When Jesus rose He met individuals: John's gospel records just Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus in the garden on that 1st Easter morning. The key to the truth about this Palm Sunday King is having an *individual* relationship with Him. And when Mary meets Jesus she is overwhelmed, changed for ever, and she runs to tell the others, "I have seen the Lord!" Her personal encounter with the risen Christ turns her into the first Christian evangelist.

Witness: Questions to discuss

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- Use Ps 118 to lead you into a time of praise.
 - Look at Zech 9:9 in its context: what aspects of Jesus do you recognize? Which aspects of Jesus are *not* fully described there?
 - How does the fact that Jesus is a King impact on our worship of and attitude to Him?
 - As a large church that can sometimes feel like a crowd, what other advantages are there in our size? How can we avoid the pitfalls mentioned above, or any others? Is there a ceiling on how large we can/should become?
 - If you have time, read the rest of Matthew's gospel and the events of Holy Week. Consider the reaction of those observing the action and imagine you were there: what would you have done/felt?
 - If appropriate, spend time saying sorry to God for your part in sending Him to the cross, but be sure to also receive His forgiveness and the assurance of His love.