

Lent 5 – Peel 24th March 2024.

Today, Palm Sunday, the Church begins what it calls Holy Week. Within the next eight days the story of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection is all told. Each year we concentrate on the account from one of Matthew, Mark or Luke, whilst reading from John every year. 2024 is a year of Mark, so we concentrate on the chapters from Mark that cover the early part of Holy Week, with a reading from John as well. We began this morning at the ancient cathedral, by hearing of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, Mark 11: 1-11, then gradually during the course of the service we have the opportunity to hear, more of the story.

The question that I so often ask myself at this point, as Palm Sunday dawns, is, "How can I encompass so much in so little time?", or, put in another more telling way: "I don't think my tiny little mind can cope with this!" Well, honestly, how do we approach Holy Week? The way that I answer this myself is always the same: "Don't strain to think too much about it, just take it within your heart and let it dwell there." In other words, "listen with intent." There is so much that we can bring to the Scripture that we will encounter that spells out our prejudices and hardened hearts. These will be broken, if we let them be, in the next few days, simply by deep listening.

Earlier we sang the hymn, "All glory, laud and honour to thee, Redeemer King" in two sections. It is, in fact, a magnificent hymn and we sing this refrain six times. We know the author of the hymn too. It was an Italian named Theodulf who lived from about 750 until he died in the year 821. He had been abbot of a monastery in Florence until he was brought to France to be Bishop of Orleans, though later he was accused of plotting against the then Emperor and was deprived of his see and imprisoned. He is said to have composed the hymn, which originally ran to even more verses while he was incarcerated in a monastery in Angers. The

story goes that on Palm Sunday in 821, Louis the Pious, King of France was at Angers and took part in the procession. As it passed the place where Theodulf was imprisoned and amid the silence of that moment Theodulf stood at the window and sang his newly composed hymn. The king was so delighted that he ordered Theodulf to be set at liberty immediately and to be restored to his see. He also ordained that the hymn should always be sung on Palm Sunday. So we are following, if this story be true, a very ancient tradition and in a translation that is itself quite old, John M Neale having created the English version, that is most commonly sung, in 1851. He mentioned at the time one of the other verses which apparently was sung until the 17th century and was omitted by him for its quaintness which runs:

Be thou O Lord the Rider,

and we the little ass;

That to God's Holy City

Together we may pass.

The thought of us seeing ourselves as the donkey by Theodulf is an interesting one, but more to our thought-patterns today is the great sense in this hymn of being swept along in the tide of events on that Palm Sunday; there is a natural movement in which the hosannas have their part, and the waving joyous bearing of palm branches by the crowd. Yes the donkey too has its place, and so has the crowd; but the intent of the procession is the all important element in this Palm Sunday story. There is a sense in which a great drama is unfolding, as indeed is the case as Jesus crests the Mount of Olives and with the memory of the raising of Lazarus and the healing of blind Bartimaeus and other miracles clear in their minds the people welcomed one who they saw to be riding to his City of Jerusalem and the destiny that awaits him there.

So we begin Holy Week and as we walk its path during the next few days let us carry this sense of drama unfolding in such a way that it becomes part of our daily reflection, causing us to pause and contemplate, but maintain the closeness of the events as we recall their happening. Our palm cross which we bear this day may help us to remember, and in remembering may lead us deeper into the heart of love which we seek throughout our lives, and witness supremely as we contemplate the Cross and its meaning during this Holy Week.

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