

The wrong end of the stick

Palm Sunday, 5/4/20

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Reflection for Morning Prayer. Readings: Philippians 2.5-11 and Matthew 21.1-11.

Early in January I was in Sainsbury's checkout queue with ten bags of sugar in my trolley. The lady behind me noticed this, paused for a moment and then hurtled off, coming back with half a dozen bags of sugar for herself. The woman behind her did the same thing. When I got to the till the checkout lady said: 'That's a lot of sugar!' 'Yes', I said, 'I'm making marmalade.' The look on the faces of the people behind me was interesting. They'd seen something apparently unusual and each had made an immediate assumption. Something must be happening – presumably a sugar shortage – so they'd better be in on it.

It's human nature to want to be in on things. It's human nature to jump to conclusions, often to assume the worst. We've seen a lot of that behaviour recently. It's human nature to be attracted to the unusual, and to join a crowd.

Jesus, who had been performing various miracles (including, according to St John, raising Lazarus from the dead) had already attracted large crowds of people. They'd come to see the signs and wonders – people had been cured, lame men walked, blind men could see, deaf men could hear. They liked the stories he told and they loved it when he fed them. They were making assumptions and jumping to conclusions which spread almost as fast through gossip as fake news spreads today on the internet. This was a wonder-worker, this was a prophet, this was a king, this was how everything miraculously was going to come right.

So the crowds followed Jesus – and then he appeared, riding a donkey. A few people in the crowd who remembered a fragment of an old prophecy quickly reminded others and the news spread: 'Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey!' So it was true – this was their king, the son of David, the promised king of the Jews. This was the Messiah who was going to lead a revolt against the hated Romans. Some people started it and the momentum grew – they stood and cheered, spread their cloaks and tree-branches on the ground, followed in an extraordinary procession. This was something they had to be in on.

And none of them had the faintest idea about what was actually going on.

Even the disciples, who had travelled and talked with Jesus for three years, questioned him and been taught by him, either didn't understand what they had been told or found it impossible to believe. Even they, who believed that Jesus was the son of God, thought that this triumphal procession was the beginning of some sort of reckoning, not just with the Roman authorities but with the Jewish leaders who had been scheming against Jesus for so long.

Just one person knew what was happening and how events would unfold. One person had been born in human likeness and would humble himself and become obedient, even to the point of death on a cross. One person knew what the crowd was expecting; knew what the Jewish and Roman leaders feared. One person knew how quickly the crowd's mood would change; fear for themselves would quickly overcome their hope of freedom. How easy it had been for them to cheer him into Jerusalem, and how easy it would be for them to jeer at him on the way to Golgotha. Jesus knew how hard it would be for himself, and for his disciples, and he knew he had still more work to do before the disciples would be able to spread the truth he had brought.

As we echo 'Hosanna' today, we do know that Jesus was the Messiah. We know, as he knew, that his true followers are not the people who lay branches at his feet, but those who lay their hearts at his feet. For that to be possible we must walk the way of the cross with him, and make his suffering and his promise the foundation of our lives. So, at the start of what will be a very different Holy Week, let us pray that these unusual circumstances will prompt us to new insights, new understanding and a deeper discipleship