

Over the last week we've seen some amazing scenes haven't we as people have lined the streets from their doorsteps, clapping, cheering, waving flags and banging saucepans, all to show our appreciation for the NHS at this time of national crises.

And it's felt like the whole country has come out in support of our doctors, nurses and key workers during this pandemic.

In that reading from Matthew it's like the whole of Jerusalem have come out to cheer for Jesus and show their appreciation on that first Palm Sunday, as he rides through the streets on a Donkey.

Verse 8 says:

"Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road."

And the crowds that went before him, and followed him were shouting:

"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

"And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

And you can imagine the scene can't you as crowds of people start to line the streets all jostling for position to get a good view as Jesus passes by.

But the crowds aren't just showing their appreciation, it's a statement of Victory.

On May 8th this year the country will be celebrating the 75th anniversary of VE day to commemorate the end of the 2nd World War.

And just like crowds celebrated Britain's Victory over Nazi Germany 75 years ago, the people in Jerusalem cheer, shout, and wave their Palm branches; in the expectation that God's promised King has come to overthrow Roman occupation.

So, this is highly charged stuff because along with their Palm branches, that are a symbol of victory, the crowd's shouting:

"Hosanna!", which means save now, and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel."

And so, the expectation is that Jesus has come to crush Israel's enemies with political and military might as he leads the nation to independence.

And after raising the dead, healing the sick, and teaching some amazing things; all the signs are there that Jesus is the one to deliver them

But for an all-conquering King it's quite an unusual victory parade, and not the show of might and power you might expect.

So just imagine the Queen riding a donkey down Horse Guards Parade during the trooping of the colour; and you get the picture.

You see instead of giving people the royal wave as he rides through Jerusalem on a chariot, or a great white steed, Jesus rides past on a donkey because he wants to redirect the crowds expectations by pointing them to an Old Testament prophecy in the book of Zechariah that says this:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your King is coming to you.
He is just and having salvation,
Lowly and riding on a donkey.

And that's a completely different picture to an all-conquering King the crowd have in mind isn't it.

The crowds Palm waving is also a statement of national pride.

So, in his inaugural speech back in 2016 Donald Trump said this:

A new national pride will stir our souls, and lift our sights, we'll make America great again.

Well it's that kind of mood we're seeing here in Jerusalem.

But unlike earthly rulers Jesus hasn't come conquer his enemies or wield political power in the way the crowd expects.

He's come to bring spiritual peace, between us and God, and each other.
So, Jesus comes in humility, not to fight against Rome, but to fight a much harder battle, against sin and death.

That's why in a weeks' time he'll be left bleeding and dying on a cross; and separated from his Father.

So, Jesus says yes, I have come to rescue you, but at a much deeper level.

And by entering Jerusalem on a donkey he shows the crowd that he's totally different from the kind of King they want.

But against all their expectations he's most definitely the King they need.

You see the way Jesus achieves victory is through humility, suffering and death.

And he hasn't come to destroy nations; but to proclaim peace to them.

So, the real celebration of Palm Sunday isn't the fact that Jesus will deliver Israel from an oppressive military power; but from the harsh, and tyrannical rule of sin as he rides towards the cross.

Well the other day I read about a German Football Club who sacked their teams long term manager after losing just two games on the bounce, that was in spite the fact that they're on top of the league after an incredible 13 wins on the trot.

You see the board of directors, who were very different from the clubs adoring fans, got rid of the club's manager even after the teams incredible run.

Well in Jerusalem the religious leaders are a very different crowd from the one cheering and clapping Jesus; and they'll be guilty of having him crucified in just a weeks' time.

But I wonder if you've ever thought that the adoring crowd are just as guilty as the men who have Jesus killed, but in a different way.

You see in spite of their enthusiasm the crowd are doing Jesus a gross injustice.

Because they simply want him on their terms; a political Messiah; instead of a Servant King.

And so, the tragic mistake with this crowd is that they're worshipping a false Jesus because their expectations are all wrong.

And it's so easy for us to do isn't it.

So, for example, how often do I simply want Jesus on my terms?

You see I'm quite happy to worship him in church on a Sunday; as long as he meets my needs, sorts out my problems; and doesn't demand too much from me in return.

And then when he doesn't match up to my expectation or give me what I want; I can get angry, disappointed, or bitter

But Jesus is under no obligation to live up to any of our expectations,

Because in the words of the old hymn we're simply called to trust and obey, not demand.

And so, although the crowd rightly recognise that Jesus is God's King who's come to save them; their understanding of him is too narrow.

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And so, Palm Sunday's a strange paradox isn't it; you see the King's coming, and the people rejoice; cheering and singing

'Hosanna in the highest!'

But they fail to understand that the King they welcome doesn't come with an army; but as a Servant, who is humble and riding a donkey.

And the only weapon he has, is the sacrificial love of God, laid out on a Cross; to defeat our greatest enemies of sin and death.

You see that's the real celebration of Palm Sunday.

And so, as we sing our 'Hosannas' at home today let's remember what Jesus is riding towards; the pain, suffering, rejection, and humiliation of a cruel Cross for you, and for me.

And so, at the start of Holy Week let's pray that as Christ entered Jerusalem, he'd enter our lives in a new way; or for the first time as we respond to him.

The one who gave his life; to bring us peace with God and each other. Amen