

A reflection for Palm Sunday and Holy Week

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, the week of the Passion of our Lord.

The word Passion comes from the Hebrew Pesach, meaning Passover. It's a reminder of the connection there is between Easter and the Exodus story in which God brings his people out of slavery to freedom, and ultimately from the wilderness into the promised land. Similarly, Christ's Passion, his journey from Palm Sunday through the cross on Good Friday, to resurrection on Easter Day, accomplishes for us freedom from slavery to sin and also the promise of a new amazing life in him.

The word 'passion' also conjures up for us the depths of Christ's feeling, of his commitment to his people, his love for us. This act of salvation really is a *passionate* act, a demonstration of his deep love and could never have been endured if he was at all half-hearted or indifferent to us. God cares passionately for us, his people and this is demonstrated in the events of Holy Week

So on the first Palm Sunday, Jesus was coming to the end of his final journey from Jericho to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish Passover. It was an upward journey, both geographically and psychologically. Jericho is below sea level but the road to Jerusalem rises some 3300ft over a 14 mile stretch. It's a hard road taking a healthy person 8-9 hours strenuous walking in the desert heat. The nearer Jesus got to his destination, he would inevitably have felt physically exhausted, but we might also imagine a growing sense of foreboding, perhaps accompanied by an equally intensifying awareness of forthcoming fulfilment or culmination of his purpose and mission.

As his journey reaches its final stages, Jesus arrives at Bethphage, on the Mount of Olives. It's from here that he tells his disciples to go into the city and fetch the donkey. And it was from here, from this mountain top, that he sets off on this momentous journey to the city of Jerusalem. He was accompanied by a huge crowd of people celebrating his arrival and hailing him as king and yet he knew that this would be his final pilgrimage, he knew his time had come and that he was soon to endure the most terrible suffering.

On Palm Sunday it's as if we're on the brink of precipice. Laid out before us are the events of Holy Week, of Christ's Passion, and we are about to descend into those depths of pain and suffering. This is metaphorically mirrored in the geography of the area. The way to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives will take Jesus across the Kidron Valley, which is filled with tombs from the first temple period. You can't get to the gleaming city without first traversing the valley of death.

It might feel odd to be praising and rejoicing on Palm Sunday when we know there is yet Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to come but Palm Sunday, affords us the amazing opportunity to view the forthcoming events from an elevated position before we descend the hill towards Jerusalem. It's like we're stood on that hill opposite the city, on the Mount of Olives, and we have this wonderful perspective of the whole story that's about to unfold in front of us. From this viewpoint we can see ahead to Jesus overturning tables in temple and reclaiming his Father's house, to his final teaching in the temple courts, to the plot to arrest Jesus, and then the events accelerating as we plunge on down into the valley and we witness the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday and praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, to Judas' betrayal and Jesus' arrest, to the disciples' fleeing and Peter's denial, to Jesus' trial and the final sentencing. And as the valley bottoms out we witness the crucifixion and the soldiers' mockery and we find ourselves at the foot of the cross, where we are completely emptied and forlorn.

But from this vantage point of Palm Sunday, still up on the mountainside, we can also see beyond to the other side of the valley, across the valley of death to the heights opposite, beyond the coming week marking such terrible events, to the wondrous place where Jesus will be resurrected and even ascended into the heavenly realms. Yes we must first traverse with Jesus the depths of the valley but it is in the knowledge that we will yet ascend to the heights. So on Palm Sunday we do shout out our praise in preparation for entering the week ahead with a resolute heart and an assurance of God's sovereignty and faithfulness. That's what Palm Sunday is about.

In light of our current situation with the coronavirus outbreak and the national lockdown, with daily news of increasing numbers of the critically ill and a frightening death rate, Palm Sunday helps us to retain a bigger perspective that assures us that this is merely a valley, albeit a dark one, but we will come through, this too will pass. God, out of a passionate love and in his characteristic faithfulness, promises to those who turn to him that they will know his comfort and his enduring strength in the valley of death (Psalm 23) and come rejoicing to life everlasting.

So today, in preparation for the week ahead when we focus more on the passion of our Lord, let's lift our eyes up towards the final outcome and praise our God and Saviour.

'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; **Hosanna in the highest!**'

Revd Janice Hamilton



Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley filled with tombs. A view similar to the one that Jesus would have had as he set off on that first Palm Sunday



Steps up to Caiaphas' house from the Kidron Valley – the uphill route Jesus would have taken following his arrest.