

Palm Sunday – Wesley 9am and 10.30am – 13th April 2014

Reading: Matthew 21:1-11 'Jesus enters Jerusalem'

Text: "When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.' (vss 10-11)

Introduction

We enter Holy Week with a diversity of emotions. On the one hand we have this joyous account of what appears to be a triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem. On the other hand we know what lies ahead for Jesus – his arrest, trial, execution on the cross, his death. The week is one we can barely comprehend. The high expectations which come crashing down in the events of the crucifixion. This roller coaster of emotions is like life itself – from the highs of success, the joys of wonderful times to the pit of depression when life turns sour or one you love dies or leaves.

We enter this emotional ride with Jesus today and journey with him through to resurrection Sunday.

Let us enter into the passage

'Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30,' write Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book titled '*The Last Week: What the Gospels really teach about Jesus' final days in Jerusalem*'. They continue by contrasting the two processions, one from the east largely composed of peasants, following a certain Jesus from Galilee riding a donkey down the Mount of Olives. On the opposite side of the city, from the west approaches the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entering the city on a war horse at the head of a column of imperial cavalry flanked by soldiers. He comes to maintain law and order during the potentially tumultuous days of the Jewish Passover. The 'Jesus procession' proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand. Pilate proclaimed 'the power of the empire was to be maintained'.

Here we have the 'central conflict of the week that ultimately led to Jesus' crucifixion.' The Roman procession is Borg's and Crossan's imaginary historical reconstruction. This serves well the purpose of accentuating the political dimensions of what they go as far as to call the 'pre-arranged counter procession of Jesus and his followers into a city made tense by heightened sensitivities of what they claim may have been as many as 200,000 pilgrims crowding into the holy city where usually there were only roughly 40,000 regular inhabitants. Enlivening the political context of the church's procession of palms with the political overtones seems appropriate in the light of last Sunday's ending of the 'Raising of Lazarus'. We read there in John 11: 47 - 50 these words after the Lazarus account:

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

"What are we accomplishing?" they asked.

"Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

Then Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up,

"You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than for the whole nation perish."

... So from that day on they plotted to take his life. (vs 53)

We need this context to see the flow of what is about to happen and the imagery that Borg and Crossan use helps to give clarity to the situation from a Roman perspective. Matthew attests that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was 'in turmoil'. It is a strong Greek word meaning 'was shaken' or 'trembled' and refers both to the crowds

and the religious fervour in the city. With Jesus riding in on a donkey, there are allusions to the passage from Zechariah 9:9-10 where the promised Messiah King of the Davidic line is portrayed as coming as a peaceful monarch 'humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey'. This prophetic contrast between donkey and war horse is wonderfully contrasted. Here comes the "Prince of Peace" ushering in a different way of life from that of the Roman overlords and the religious hierarchy of the day.

Jesus is lauded as he enters the city with branches laid before him, people taking off their cloaks to lay on the ground, a sign of royal homage given to him. The people in response to the question, "Who is this?" respond with, "This is Jesus the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Here in Matthew, 'the crowd' takes on its own persona like a homogenous person, here welcoming Jesus but soon changing their tune. Later in the week there comes from the crowd, "crucify him, crucify him."

Crowds are amazing – watch a footy game – any code, it doesn't matter. The passion, the encouragement is there. Then suddenly as their team is losing, there is the abuse of the umpire/referee, nothing is going their way and finally as the team slumps further there can be the actual abuse towards their own players. From adulation to condemnation can happen in such a short time. The emotional rollercoaster is ever present and here in the crowd, momentarily giving Jesus royal treatment as he enters the city.

It begs the question: "Where are we in this story as we journey with Jesus?"

Meditation

Let me share a portion of a meditation that comes from the book, *"Dirt, Mess and Danger – liturgies & worship resources"* by Glendon Macaulay (page 58) (I have added a different ending)

"The Briefest of Encounters"

Palm Sunday in Jerusalem. The shouting gets louder,
The noise swells to a roar. 'Hosanna!' is the cry of the crowd.
'Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord!'

You are there that day; one of the great throng of people tightly packed together in the streets, waiting for Jesus to come.

Can you hear their cheering? Look at all the colour.

Inside you feel excited and expectant just like the rest of them.

O my God! Here he comes now: Jesus the Messiah;
Jesus his people's Redeemer; Jesus, the Saviour of the world.
You join in the cheering as well.

Caught up in the excitement of the moment, you also shout 'Hosanna! Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord!'

(pause)

What do you shout later in the week?

What do you shout as a Christian today?