

Ben O'Neill

Sermon for S. Botolph's Cambridge, Palm Sunday 2020

This morning I had expected to preach in Budapest, but instead, owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, I remain in County Durham. We are dispersed and separated, but God keeps His promise that whenever two or three are gathered in His Name, He is here in our midst. I am grateful to Fr. Stephen for allowing me to share these reflections with you: be assured of my prayers for every blessing in these unprecedented times.

We have reached Palm Sunday. With Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, narrated in our Gospel reading this morning, we are entering Holy Week. Easter is in sight! The beginning of Lent seems to be a distant memory, but I want to call your attention back to Ash Wednesday. At Mass on that day, the cross of ash is marked on the forehead, with the words, 'remember that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return.' In most churches around the world, the ash that is applied to the foreheads comes from the previous year's Palm Crosses. This is very fitting; it shows us the two sides of praise, that praise and humility go hand-in-hand, they are inseparable from one another. Praise is about recognising that we are not at the centre of the universe, however much we (and society) like to think we are. And this is the problem, if you like, of the crowd on Palm Sunday: the crowd wants to use Jesus for its own ends, while remaining in control. They have expectations as to how Jesus can serve them and save them according to their terms, they have not yet made the connection between praise (worship) and humility.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus is met with praise, cheering, and the laying down of cloaks, as he enters the city: "Sing Hosanna to the king of kings." But this cry of 'Hosanna! Hosanna' will become a cry of 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' on Good Friday. The crowd on Palm Sunday expect Jesus to be an earthly king, to yield an earthly sceptre – when the crowd hail him as an earthly political leader, they want Him to demonstrate His power, for their ends and to their benefit. They want him to rise up against the Romans. And this is what the Romans expect him to do too – this is how the crowd is able to bribe Pilate in John's Gospel by telling him that a choice to free Jesus would set him at odds with the Emperor: 'If you free this man, you are no friend of Caesar's.' Jesus is seen by the Roman authorities as a threat to authority, and so it is better to kill Him to keep the peace.

The crowd is fickle, and so can we be. The reason for the crowd's sudden change of heart is this: that when they no longer see, in Jesus, what they want from Him, they give up. They miss the connection between praise, worship and subservience, they want to retain sovereignty for themselves. We too can worship selectively: when everything is going well in our lives, we think we can survive on our own; it often takes a crisis to remind us that we are not fully in control, and to prompt the humility that is a necessary part of worship.

We should of course proclaim Jesus as our King, for that is what He is, both by virtue of His status as one person of the Trinity, present in and through creation, and by virtue of His actions, His defeat of death and sin, to win the keys of death and hell and reign supreme. But as Jesus makes clear in Our Gospel this morning, His Kingdom not of this world. We, therefore, have to be prepared that following Him will not meet, but rather will challenge and exceed our expectations. Jesus does save the crowd but not in the way that they were expecting: not with earthly power, and from oppression, Roman occupation, but from their sins, from death, from fear, from a different kind of slavery. His power is not demonstrated by taking arms, but on the cross. Not by the laurel crown of a Roman emperor, but by the crown of thorns. Jesus is the King of love on Calvary. It is in the victory over sin and death that His true power will be revealed, not in the way that the crowd had expected.

This has repercussions for the way we pray at a time such of this of international crisis and pandemic. If we see prayer as a request for *things*, for specific needs, to end the virus, to restore the health of this/that person, make more toilet roll appear on the shop aisles, "let me get back to church soon" – then we will most likely be disappointed, as things happen in different ways and on different timescales from what we had anticipated. Prayer is not solely about asking for things we think we need, but about aligning our wills with that of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, who knows our ignorance in asking and our needs before we do ourselves, and is closer to us than we are to our own breath. And so, let us worship Him, endeavouring not just to ask what we want from Him, but what He wants for us: true worship and humility.