

Let me set the scene with apologies to those who are not followers of the English rugby team:

82,319 people have come together in the temple of rugby to worship the ones who will free them from the torture that is known as Welsh and Irish supremacy; they have sung as one with fulsome voice that they had indeed looked over the Jordan and seen a band of angels coming to carry them home; they have sung of their vision that a low swinging sweet chariot will come to take them to heaven just as it did for the Prophet Elijah.

They have sung of their desire to have bows of burning gold; arrows of desire; and promised they will not cease from mental fight, nor will the sword sleep in their hand till they have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.

And then fifteen men in white representing all their dreams, hopes, wishes and desires carry out a miracle in front of another nine and a half million TV viewers – they battle and battle and in the very last minute of time they do the impossible, they score and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Hosanna in the Highest indeed!

And yet, less than 3 weeks later, public opinion was divided; yes, the men in white had done their best, they had won this battle, but they had lost the war. Ireland still reigned supreme. Their saviours had, after so many promises, failed them. Choices now faced them....should they abandon the ones they put their trust in or stick with them till better times come?

I mention this to try to give you a feel for what many in the crowd might have felt as Jesus made what has become known as his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Here was the answer to their dreams and hopes!

When we were in the Holy Land we stood on the Mount of Olives looking across at the city walls; from there you can see the remains of the gate where Jesus would have entered on his colt and I can remember at the time thinking how different Jesus' procession would have been to the other one.....

Yes, Jesus' procession was not the only one to enter Jerusalem that day. Roman historians of the day recorded that the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, had also made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Every year during Passover week Jerusalem would be filled with at least 200,000 Jewish pilgrims, coming together to remember how they'd once suffered under a brutal empire and how they had been liberated from that empire when God had heard their cries and sent someone to save them.

So every year at the beginning of Passover week, Pontius Pilate, the highest Roman official in Judea would make the journey from his seaside home in Caesarea Maritima to Jerusalem. And he came, as they say, in style and to make a point.

His was a triumphal entry in the style of a victorious returning army which was the done thing in Rome; he would be atop a gleaming chariot pulled by the finest pure bred Arabian stallions ahead of a cohort or more of experienced and battle hardened foot soldiers and cavalry, all led by imperial banners which declared 'Caesar is Lord'.

A gaudy but unmistakable display of power meant to intimidate the citizens of Jerusalem and remind them of the reality of their situation under Roman rule and of course the civil leaders would have gone to great lengths to ensure that the crowds were out excitedly cheering the arrival of Pilate through the grand western gate closest to the Temple compound.

But as I said, there were two processions that day, so let's go back to Jesus and his entry. We read that Jesus approached from the Mount of Olives; directly east from Jerusalem and the opposite side entered by Pilate. Walking in Jesus' footsteps takes on a whole new meaning when you are there in Israel. There's no doubt about it that as I stood somewhere close to where Jesus would have stood two thousand years ago I had an undeniable sense of wonder as I looked at the eastern gate that still exists remembering that I knew the outcome over the week following his entry.

On another occasion when we stopped overlooking the ancient winding road between Jerusalem and Jericho a man rode past side saddle on a young donkey, bouncing up and down to match the stride of the animal, just I'm sure, as Jesus would have done. The fully grown man seemingly unaware of how small and frail the young colt looked in comparison and yet this is the way Jesus planned to enter Jerusalem. Not like Pilate, astride a war chariot but on a best of burden and an untrained and immature one to boot.

There can be no doubt that Jesus has planned his entry. Matthew records Jesus' own words, as he instructs two of his disciples to go and find the colt of a donkey tied up; even telling the disciples if challenged what to say in order to secure the colt's release.

By choosing the colt of a donkey Jesus not only fulfils a prophecy but also enacts a gesture of humility and peaceful intent in total contrast to the pomp and pageantry displayed by Pilate.

Other than when riding on a boat, this is the only time we hear of Jesus not using his own two feet to travel; it is a deliberate act of self disclosure for those with eyes to see or, after his resurrection, with memories to remember and bring together all the events of the proceeding weeks and years. The Jews were expecting a messiah of past prophecies; a king who with sword in hand and saddled on a steed of war would liberate them from the Romans. But in Jesus, the king they sought chose to come to them humbly on a borrowed slow moving colt of a donkey. Yes, this was symbolic of a king who would come in peace, according to the prophet Zacharia but it was not how the people in the crowd anticipated.,

And the two processions couldn't have been more different in the messages they conveyed also. Pilate, leading battle hardened Roman troops, asserts the power and might of the Roman Empire which crushed all who oppose it and Jesus, riding on a young donkey, embodying the peace and tranquillity that God brings to his people.

As I told last week, Jesus had just brought Lazarus back to life; news of that surely preceded his arrival. And during the three years of his ministry Jesus had healed many who came to him for cures; made the blind see; the lame walk; fed 5,000 with only five loaves and two fishes and the excitement and expectation was inevitably there in the crowds.

Jesus had been challenging those who ruled in Judea for the past three years; not the Roman rulers but those who ruled on Rome's behalf - the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the priests and the temple scribes. They were part of the same system of oppression and domination that Pilate oversaw and yet those who in common parlance might be termed the ordinary citizen were proclaiming him with the words "Hosanna to the son of David"

That's what the ordinary person wanted; to be ruled by a man like David, a man so committed to God that the Old Testament prophets had declared that the coming Messiah would bring back the glory of Israel; would rid the nation of oppressors; and would rule benevolently.

Yet, and this is what I find puzzling, despite this desire for a Messiah shaped in the style of David, they ecstatically cheer Jesus as he makes his humble entrance; they sing praises out loud; they give Jesus the equivalent of our modern day red carpet treatment by throwing their cloaks and palm fronds onto the floor in front of him. Adulation, in action.

And yet as we all know just a few days later Jesus will have disappointed them to the extent that they turn on him; even those closest to him, the twelve disciples, will either betray him outright or abandon him in confusion and fear.

But just for a moment, let's not get ahead of ourselves and instead place ourselves in that city some 2,000 odd years ago. That is what we have been doing in our Lent course for the past four Wednesdays.....asking ourselves difficult questions like Peter "Would I have done anything different in his position?" or the Centurion "Do I excuse my actions by saying I'm just following orders?" or like Mary stood at the cross "How much awareness do I have of Jesus' tenacious love?"

So today I want to ask you:

"If you had been in Jerusalem that day and had seen both processions passing by, which would you have chosen to follow?"

Because that is the choice we make every day; to seek safety in power, prestige and position or to seek uncertainty by serving with humility and love. To choose the easy option by following the crowd or to stand out from the crowd and do things as God intends them to be.

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week and each of us will have to make other choices this week; whether or not to spend a quiet 30 minutes here in church on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings to think about different aspects of Holy week; whether or not to join with the church family for a Passover supper on Maundy Thursday; whether or not to spend an hour before the cross on Friday afternoon when through music, readings and

silence have an experiential opportunity to think more deeply about the crucifixion; whether or not to financially support our lent appeal.

Please think on what I have said today; we have all been given a palm cross to take away and of course you have any number of things you can do with it.

There's no escaping the fact, we have choices to make:

We can discard it in a bin or we can hold it when we pray, remembering Jesus

We can put it inside a dusty book on the bookshelf and forget all about it or we can use it as a marker in our daily bible reading

We can use it as a taper when we light our first barbeque or we can give it to a lonely neighbour and invite them to light it at the barbeque and share the meal with us

Or you can hold it aloft and shout Hosanna, literally cheering Jesus on confirming the truth that through his suffering we have been saved.

Hosanna to the son of David.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord

Hosanna in the highest

In fact why not let's do that right now.