

The Palm Branch and the Crown – Palm Sunday 28 March 2010

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 118:1-2,19-29; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 19:28-40

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday with the familiar symbols of palm crosses. As a child I loved receiving my new palm cross each year. I loved the feel of it and the thoughts that surrounded it as the church's year turned once more towards Easter. I kept it tucked into the edge of the mirror in my bedroom, a symbol and a constant reminder of Christ and of this time of year.

Symbols can carry layers of meaning that would take many words to articulate. You will see before the altar 2 familiar symbols – the palm leaf cross and the crown of thorns.

Here we have, amongst other layers of meaning, two examples of a bonded contrast between the physical nature of the symbol and what is symbolised. Twin meanings held together by material form and the shape that material takes.

The palm-leaf cross shows us the medium of acclaim in the form of pain - the palm leaves of acclaim in the form of the approaching cross.

The crown of thorns is constructed in the opposite way with the medium of pain in the form of acclaim – the thorns of pain in the form of a king's crown.

In a symbol we can hold those meanings together much more easily than we can in words.

Today let us look more closely at the palm cross. Familiarity takes away some of the impact. Instead of the palm cross, try to imagine a tickertape

noose or an electric chair made of flowers. Adulation and death. Cheers and condemnation. Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

Our palm crosses echo both the adulation of Palm Sunday and the crucifixion of Good Friday.

As our Lenten Easter journey moves onward, we are acutely conscious of the proximity of the cross. Unlike Jesus' family, friends and followers at the time, we are also conscious of the resurrection, and of Jesus' ultimate triumph over death. For us, the sting of death is overcome by the glory of the resurrection. But I ask you to shorten your perspective a little and to imagine, if you will, the triumphant acclamation of Jesus by the great crowds in the streets of Jerusalem being a prelude to his execution.

It is tempting to see those at the crucifixion differently from those at Jesus' palm-strewn entry into Jerusalem. Paintings of the crucifixion generally show a small number of grief-stricken supporters surrounded by hostility, indifference or the desolate waste of abandonment. Where are the crowds that acclaimed his arrival in Jerusalem such a short time before?

If we want to know where they disappeared to, we need only look at adoring crowds in our own time, place and culture. Why do adoring crowds gather in the streets? They gather to acclaim their heroes. When I was a little girl we lined the streets for what seemed like hours to see the Queen drive by. It took less than 10 seconds but we sat through the long wait and then cheered and waved as we were expected to do. We did get tired of the waiting but we were not unwilling.

These days the crowds are more likely to gather to cheer and wave at pop stars or sporting heroes – the international champions or the Olympic gold medallists who come into the city, not on humble donkeys, but by plane and flashy motorcade, to receive the cheers of the crowds and perhaps even the key to the city. They are heroes because they give us what we want. When they no longer give us what we want, we no longer cheer and wave. Our praise comes with expectations.

The palm-waving crowds of Jerusalem also melted away by the time of Jesus' crucifixion. What did they want from Jesus?

Miracles perhaps? Jesus had raise Lazarus from the dead, healed the sick, cured the blind and the lame. Would he perform more miracles for them to see? Did they seek drama and spectacle?

Or were they wanting revolution? Jerusalem was ripe for revolution. There had been riots and general unrest. Other political dissidents had led unsuccessful movements against the Romans. Would Jesus be David's military and political successor, the one who would re-establish the golden age of the monarchy?

“Hosanna” is a word that we associate with Palm Sunday. It is a word of praise and adoration but within its shades of meaning it also carries a cry for salvation. The crowds who acclaimed Jesus were hailing him as their saviour, the one who would bring salvation of one kind or another. But things did not go as they hoped and expected.

They were not expecting a mocking trial and a shameful death. Where were the power and the glory here? Where was the fulfilment of the great hopes and expectations of Jesus' arrival in the city?

We know that for us the path of glory and the path to the cross are the same path. This path leads through the acclaim of Palm Sunday, through the pain of the cross, to the joy of the resurrection.

We long to join Jesus' triumphal procession of Palm Sunday, but we may be reluctant to accept the way of the cross. We may find ourselves burdened by the past or fearful of the future, yet this Palm Sunday we receive our palm crosses, a reminder of the welcome offered to Jesus as he travelled toward the cross.

When we sing words like *"All glory, laud and honour to you Redeemer, King! To whom the lips of children made sweet Hosannas ring"* we show that for us Palm Sunday is not the high point of an enthusiasm that will ebb away in the face of the cross. Jesus **is** worthy of praise and honour. He **is** our redeemer and our king, not despite the cross but because of it.

For us, Palm Sunday is not the peak from which it all goes downhill. It is the prelude to Easter; the beginning of commitment to Christ the King, whose kingdom is not the fruit of armed revolution but of faith. Jesus **is** the King of Israel, David's Royal Son, our Saviour and Redeemer, the King of glory. He is more than worthy to be praised and honoured, not only with palm leaves but with our lives.

We join with the crowd that first Palm Sunday who eagerly awaited the coming of Jesus.

Blessed is the One who comes in the name of God!

Hosanna in the highest!