

Palm Sunday 2015

*We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you:
because by your holy cross
you have redeemed the world. Amen*

How many friends would you say you had? 5, 10, 100, 1000? How would you decide who to include? Would you only choose those who offer real support or would you include other acquaintances as well? How about more distant associations? Would you, for instance, include those thousands of Facebook friends that you have?

I imagine the crowds who cheered Jesus' entry into Jerusalem - as the first century equivalent of his Facebook friends. They see him as a celebrity. They enjoy the way his teaching challenges the political structures of the day, they are in awe of his healing powers, but they are not really followers or true friends; just individuals looking to get whatever they can for free – be it excitement, entertainment or maybe even an odd gift of healing.

They may well have liked to listen to his words, or witness his actions, but they don't really allow him to change who they are or how they behave. In fact, when they are forced to respond to his example, they take the easy option, rather than the right one. As today's Gospel readings make clear, they are not prepared to change into the people Christ calls them to be. In fact, as following becomes increasingly challenging their shouts of 'hosanna' turn into shouts of a very different nature as they all cry 'crucify him'.

There were a few, however, who were willing to try and be true. The disciples don't get it right in the beginning, but these are a community of believers who try their best to allow Jesus to change them for the better. A group who get it wrong at times, but who try to stay true to him, even when his teaching is challenging and demands so very much from them. One way or another, these are twelve individuals who will follow Jesus to the very end. They don't get there immediately, but somehow Jesus miraculously forms them into a community that eventually becomes his church – his only plan for the salvation of the world. Following Christ's departure, it is this group, that instil reverence in the believing community and unite followers with Christ through ritual and devotion. This early church pass down his traditions and teachings. It is this same Church, through our inheritance of Bishops and Priests, that we are a part of today.

And so, just like these twelve followers, we are faced with a stark question: Are we willing to follow Jesus to the end, wherever it may lead us?

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Today is called Palm Sunday because it is the Sunday when we relive Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, when the crowds waved Palm branches and sang songs of praise and joy. Today is also sometimes referred to as Passion Sunday, because it marks the beginning of the most solemn season of the church's year, Holy Week, where we rehearse the events leading up to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. For Jesus, as for us, this day marks a paradoxical juxtaposition; triumph and slaughter, exultation and sacrifice, jubilation and earthly downfall.

The consensus of biblical scholars is that the Passion Narratives, the accounts of Jesus' Last Supper with his friends, his betrayal, trial and subsequent execution, were the first parts of the Gospels to be written down. They are called Passion Narratives because they record God's passionate love for the world revealed in and through the crucifixion of Jesus; the Latin root of the word passion is *passio*, meaning suffering.

In light of all this, we are faced with the same stark question: Are we willing to follow Jesus to the end, wherever it may lead us?

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This is why what we do in this worship space is so very important. It is important every week, but especially this week. We process into church, today, because we have a duty to ensure that the story is authentically retold, not just by words, but also by mannerisms, actions and our attention.

The bible records several religious processions. To name but a few, we have the encircling of the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6), the bringing of the Ark up to Jerusalem by King David to the accompaniment of psalms and music (2 Samuel 6:1), and most famously Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Because of this, processions have been a part of Christian ritual from the earliest days. This is why we have a procession most weeks before our services. On Palm Sunday, we expand this tradition to include a full procession through the gates of the Churchyard into church. It is our duty to continue to retell and re-enact the story in authentic ways.

There is also, of course, the most sombre procession of all, Christ's last and painful journey to the cross – a journey we will be revisiting in our own, albeit less than adequate way, on Good Friday.

Each of these processions are marked with their own rituals and protocol.

In an age of informality where the accent is on dressing down, there can be a temptation to dispense with some ceremony. It strikes me that to do so, however, forgets our primary purpose for being together. God brings us here to relive his actions, to make present his story, to reveal the great traditions that we are a part of. He also calls us here to devote an hour or so to him. For just a short time each week we must let go of our worldly pre-occupations and focus intently on his presence and his calling. We let go of all that we are so that we can see him more clearly. We become amazed at the great sacrifice he has made for us, the depth of his infinite love. What we wear, the roles we undertake and the way we undertake them, what we do, what we focus upon form how deeply we can live as a Christian community in this place, a community focused solely on Christ – and how we may make him known in our world.

Palm Sunday, then, is the beginning of that one week of the year when we dedicate ourselves to a most holy journey, as each day we join together as the holy community of this place walking a journey with our Lord. For this next week, all this comes into focus in a most powerful way. As the week progresses, and we re-live those final days of our Lord on earth, we feel the intensity, dedication and devotion rising in us. And through the devotion, Christ reveals to us the full meaning of why we join together every week as his body in this place.

Palm Sunday, Passion Sunday, Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday offer us a chance to enter into the Gospel Narrative for ourselves and feel in our deepest psyche the reality of what Christ, our God, has done for us. And if we let it will reveal to us the same answer that Jesus' friends eventually came to realise for themselves; we are willing to follow Jesus to the end, wherever it may lead us!

*God be gracious to us and bless us
and make your face to shine upon us,
that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.*

Amen.

R.T. Parker-McGee 2015