

**PALM SUNDAY 2021**  
**Following Christ is no cakewalk**

Well, I am sure you are all aware that we are coming to the end of Lent. Today is Palm Sunday, and as you know Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week. And what a week it is. Very soon we will mark a seminal moment in the history of humankind. The redemption of our souls. The redemption of the world.

And so on this Palm Sunday I want to focus our eyes on **two great processions**. The first we remember today. Christ entering Jerusalem triumphantly, seated on a donkey. And on this day some two thousand years ago, He got a great reception! We have just read about it in our readings. Hosanna! They shouted. People cheered him, spread their cloaks out for him, cut palm branches from nearby palm trees, flung them down before him. It was a great occasion!

And the second great procession? Well that was quite different to the first. He may have entered Jerusalem **this day** two thousand years ago a hero, but the next time he left it - He left it in shame! He left it a condemned criminal. Scorned by many. Condemned to carry a cross, to be crucified between two criminals.

On both occasions he was followed by a crowd. But this time the crowd was hostile. And don't we see it today? On our television screens, on our Twitter Feeds, our social media, our newspapers. How extraordinary mankind is. One time he is for you and the next – *well*, he is against you. One time he will die for you the next time he will kill you!

Well, it was the same crowd on both occasions! It was that same crowd who a few days before had met him in adoration, now buying for his blood. It is an awful condemnation on us all. But that's the way it was. As they crowded in behind him they were looking forward to a great spectacle. But this time it was an execution.

And so what I would like to do for the rest of our time this morning is look at certain figures who stand out in the crowd that first Holy Week. There were certain figures in that extraordinary drama, that last week of Jesus life, that I want to talk to you about. They stand out in that drama. Each speak with a voice of their own. And dare I say it, we may see ourselves in that crowd. So let's take a look.

**Firstly there was Pilate.** The politician. An ambitious man. An organisation man. But a man who was willing to compromise his beliefs for his career. The gospels tell us that when Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat that day, his wife sent him a message...

*"Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, Jesus, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him." Matt. 27:19*

But Pilate? He yielded to the crowd. He certainly didn't listen to his wife! He past sentence on Jesus, and handed him over to the will of the people. He knew Christ was innocent! But you know what? Career opportunities overrode righteous judgment. And so He gave over an innocent man to suffer the most awful death. The greatest miscarriage of justice in history! It was Pilate who had him led away to Golgotha, the site of crucifixion. No one else. Golgotha was the place where common criminals were slain.

You know, on reflection, we haven't far to search for the meaning of all of this. But let me tell you. What man planned for evil God meant for good. There was an old custom amongst the Jews. Each year a goat was brought to the High Priest. He laid his hand upon it and by that action laid the sins of the people on the goat's head. That goat was then led away, and sent out into the wilderness. The goat became the carrier for the people's sin. So in our Passion story, our Lord became the scapegoat. He became the carrier. God, we are told, had laid upon him the iniquity of us all. He was our sin-bearer.

You know, we take sin so lightly these days. We see it all around us. But let's be honest, what do we do? We make excuses for our sin. In some cases, we don't even say it is sin. And what we seldom do is confess it. But let me tell you. Christ taking away the sins of the world is useless unless we confess our sins. Unless we repent of our sins. The first thing that Jesus said in his ministry was, 'Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.'

So let us get a proper idea of this. Sin was so great and so destructive, it was so vile, that it took the creator of the world to come in the flesh in order to redeem us from it. Do we really understand what has been done on our behalf to redeem us? Do we really know that someone had to die for our sins? Do you really know why this had to happen? Because sin has separated us from God and as a result, from one and other. And the only remedy of that sin has to be the death of the Creator of the world. Why Him? Because only HE was good enough to pay the price of sin. Nothing else would do it. Never underestimate the terribleness of sin.

But let me say again, the world does not like to be convicted of sin. It didn't like Jesus's message 2000 years ago, and it is no different today. Man still doesn't like to be told that he is a sinner. And just as it turned ferociously on Christ, so it will be the same for us, who are the church, the body of Christ. So, if we truly call ourselves Christians then we must bear the same reproach as our LORD, the criticism, the rejection. But let's remember what our Lord said to his disciples prior to his crucifixion.

(John 15:18)

<sup>8</sup> "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. <sup>19</sup> If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

The Gospel is radical. It convicts the world of sin. It is counter cultural. And the world does not like it.

Well let us get back to our man in the crowd. Organisation man. Pilate, well he was unable to rise above the lure of this world. That day he was confronted with a stark choice. But in order to save his own skin and save his career he condemned an innocent man to death on a cross.

Another group in that crowd that day were the women. Unlike many of Jesus' followers they were with the Lord in the good times and the bad. The procession into Jerusalem as King, and the road to Calvary as a condemned man. They stuck by our Lord through thick and thin. There were so absolutely loyal to him. Isn't it wonderful? Brave, Solid, upright, Women. And these women stayed til the end, at a time when everyone else had fled the scene. At that moment when his enemies are at their most scornful and at their most terrifying. They are there. These women, crying tears of compassion at the side of the suffering of their blessed Saviour. And Christ accepts it.

But In so doing he corrects the object of their grief. He says to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem', you see he is full of love for them. "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me but weep for yourselves.' He is telling them to be careful of sympathy which goes no further than themselves. Sympathy can be a very cheap emotion. You see, if we do feel pity, we must not just be content and leave it there. If we do feel pity, we must crystallise that pity into action. And if we feel sorry for someone. Don't just keep on feeling sorrowful for that person. Do something to help them. That is what the women did that day when Jesus was led to Golgotha, the site of crucifixion. These women are so important in the passion story, as they were throughout the whole history of the early church.

**The last person I want to look at is Simon of Cyrene.** Simon was travelling to Jerusalem for the Passover celebrations, minding his own business, until he is seized by Roman soldiers and asked to carry the cross. What a surprise for Simon! He had come up for the Feast of Passover and then he finds himself in the middle of a commotion. And Christ, our Saviour, weakened by the treatment over the preceding days. Having been terribly abused by this stage. The flogging had cut the flesh from his bones. He was in a bad state. He stumbled he fell. He couldn't stand up he was so weak. And so the unwitting Simon is pulled out of the crowd, and is compelled to bear the cross of Christ. He shrinks from doing it, but he gives way in the end to a superior force. So he carries the cross to Calvary. He thought he was a spectator. But he was there at the death of our Lord.

Well, let's carry on with this. Simon was Christ's cross bearer nearly two thousand years ago. But whether we like it or not, as I have already pointed out, we like Simon, are called to be Christ's cross-bearers now! Here, in this generation. And it is not the Romans who are calling us to carry that cross – it is Christ himself. Now, let's be honest, there is something in us that doesn't want to carry that cross! But at the same time, because we love Jesus, we know we have to carry it. If you are like me, most of us just want a quiet peaceful life. And yet Jesus doesn't actually promise that. No he doesn't. He says we are going to suffer but at the same time he encourages us, and he tells us that the rewards of following Him are wonderful, they are eternal life, to be with God forever, it is to find the reason for our very being, but for this time we may have to endure suffering.

You know in the time of the early persecutions of the Christian church it was the martyrs who bore Christ's cross. The people saw those martyrs suffer and die. But you know the saying, 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.' (Tertullian). And you know it is the same today. The world watches us, it watches everything that we do. How we suffer, how we conduct our business and how we live our daily lives. How we live with disappointment and how we deal with success. You know, in *everything* that we do, if they don't see Christ in us, after we have proclaimed him, then they will laugh at us for that profession of faith. They will say, 'we hear it in your words, but we don't see it in your actions.'

Well there you have it – the crowd. The men, the women, the foreigner, the ruler. A real collection of humanity there. **So, lastly, we come to ourselves.** Where are you in that crowd? Where was I in that crowd?

How do we share this cross of Christ? We do it by serving Christ now! And this isn't easy. There are times when we all feel it is more convenient to forget about the Christian faith and what it implies. You know, in our work, in our families, out in the nitty gritty of ordinary life, we know that we are supposed to think about Christ in all situations. We are told that we are to pray in all situations. But it is hard to think of him like this. Yet, He expects this of us. But Jesus knows this, he knows our weakness, that is why he has given us the Holy Spirit to help us accomplish it.

*Come down O Love Divine, Seek thou this soul of mine, and visit it with thine own ardour glowing. O comforter draw near, within my heart appear, and kindle it thy holy flame bestowing.*

**AMEN**