

St Mary Abbots, Matins

Palm Sunday

Isaiah 5:1-7 and Luke 20:9-19

Father Christopher

Who is the main character in our Palm Sunday narrative? Jesus? Well, you wouldn't be wrong there, but anyone else? How about the donkey? Well, I was rather saddened that we didn't have a donkey for our procession earlier, after the privations of the last couple of years, but no, not the donkey.

How about the crowd? Well, the contrast between the crowd shouting 'Hosanna!' and then 'Crucify him!' five days later is certainly one of the most obvious resonances as we hear of Jesus's procession into Jerusalem. But how does any of that fit with the readings we have heard this morning? Or have you just had the dregs, after the 9.30 congregation heard the main story earlier?

There is I think some connection, even if it does not emerge on first hearing. The common factor in our two readings is the vineyard - so far, so removed from Jesus's entry into Jerusalem you might think; except the vineyard in both cases represents the people of Israel, who this morning welcome Jesus. We have to be very careful as we consider the various passages associated with the rest of Jesus's last week, in which 'the Jews' are held up as *rejecting* Jesus, and even being to blame for His death.

The gospels were after all written by Jews, about Jesus, a Jew, and all of the disciples were Jews. The word 'Christian' had not yet been coined, and all, apart from the Romans of course, would have thought of themselves as faithful Jews.

But in Isaiah we hear that the vineyard, or Israel, '*when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes*'; and in Jesus's parable, the husbandmen of the vineyard cast the son of their landlord out and kill Him.

Jesus tells this parable immediately *after* His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He has just been acclaimed by the crowd, and yet He knows He will ultimately be rejected. At this stage however, the priests and scribes are the ones who fear the crowd, and are therefore unable yet to lay their hands on Jesus. So, the crowd is ever present, in our readings and in the whole drama of this week, even if individuals will from time to time emerge with critical roles. But if the crowd, and the vineyard, represent the people of Israel, what relevance for us?

It doesn't map at all easily onto our modern, multi-confessional state, where indeed a quarter of the population in the last census identified as having no faith.

Thomas Hobbes said that the monarch has the power to make laws because "*they are the representants of a Christian people [and] church; for a church and a commonwealth of Christian people, are the same.*" Now however, we only tend to acknowledge religious authority over those who actively choose their religion. So what moral are we to draw from our passages of scripture which assume, as Hobbes did, a whole people together choosing whether to accept Christ and his authority? I think, on one level, we perhaps have to be honest, and consign some of the significance to their context, a context which has now passed. And yet crowds are still fickle, and the question as to who and what values have authority in our communities and society is still as relevant as ever.

I remember the shock of the riots in London in 2011, staying inside, hoping they wouldn't come to our part of this city, as we read reports of Clapham being trashed and jewellers in Pimlico Road being raided by the mob. And indeed, the Prince of Wales had his car windows smashed and the Duchess of Cornwall was famously poked at with a stick. We perhaps remember the fear on her face, and how shocking that was; even though the following year Their Royal Highnesses would be smiling and waving as the crowds lined the banks of the Thames for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee pageant. Crowds are strange, amorphous things. Were the crowds rioting the same as the ones celebrating the Jubilee? We might ask the same question about the ones acclaiming Jesus and then shouting

'*Crucify!*' Crowds appear out of nowhere, and then drift away as mysteriously. But they are made up of individuals, as Margaret Thatcher reminded us, and we all have our role to play in shaping our communal identity.

I remember a close friend at university, who is Chinese, arguing that individual rights don't matter, as long as the majority are as prosperous as possible. He is now in the People's Political Consultative Conference, their equivalent of the House of Lords.

The Christian and Enlightenment values which we have perhaps taken for granted as being prevalent, have competition. And as the values which govern the world order shift, so it seems does the respect for human rights and a rules-based order which we had always assumed the major nations would at least generally seek to follow, or at least maintain a pretence of doing so.

It seems as we watch the pictures coming out of Bucha, and indeed hear accounts from the Ukrainians arriving here in Kensington, that that too might be shifting - only *might*, but as well as being horrified by those war crimes for the sake of what they have inflicted on those individual men, women and children, and on those who knew and loved them, it is worth noting what they might signify more generally.

We may not explicitly hope for Christ's lordship over all people, or at least not this side of the apocalypse, in any over-bearing, domineering sort of way, which would not after all be Christ-like, but as we hear of the people of Jerusalem shouting '*Hosanna*' and then '*Crucify him!*', as well as of those two vineyards – one bringing forth bad grapes and the other ejecting and killing the son – they prompt us to consider what values have authority in our world, and indeed in our country.

We may be horrified at much of what we see going on around us, but we have a voice within the crowd, impotent as we may often feel. Do we cry with others, '*Hosanna*' or '*Crucify him!*', or indeed remain silent, watching which way the wind is blowing; as indeed I think we see in some politicians as they work out how to respond to different groups and categories of refugees? Or do we see what is the way of Christ in our world and proclaim it fearlessly?

Crowds can be dangerous, even in our own day; and indeed, the world order is a crowd of a sort, as civilised as her assembled diplomats might appear at the United Nations General Assembly. Crowds can also be a force for good. As Christians we do not have a falsely optimistic view of the world. We walk with Christ the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha at the heart of our year, after all. But we do believe in Christ's lordship over this world, and pray daily, '*Thy kingdom come.*' And it is His authority over the world that I think we see in His entry into Jerusalem, even if we would see what kind of kingship it is on Good Friday.

As we stand figuratively in the crowd this week, swaying with the general opinion, today shouting '*Hosanna!*' and on Friday '*Crucify him!*', consider where you stand. We do of course acknowledge our own sinfulness in identifying with the crowd on both those days, but these depictions of the crowd also remind us that in a world as compromised as it has ever seemed, each person within a crowd has a conscience; and indeed, there is I think a *collective* conscience.

In acknowledging the lordship of Christ, it is no good limiting His jurisdiction to our private world. Our world needs the lordship of Christ more than ever, and each of us can play our part in proclaiming it.

For the sake of every child, woman and man who has effectively had '*Crucify Him!*' shouted by the crowd in our world – whether through war, neglect or straightforward inequality, it is our duty to shout back louder, and with hope, '*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven.*' Amen