

Palm Sunday 2020

⁸ *A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!'*

'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'

'Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

¹⁰ *When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, 'Who is this?'*

¹¹ *The crowds answered, 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.'*

(Matthew 21:8-11)

In Wales, where I was brought up, Palm Sunday is known as Sul y Blodau, Sunday of Flowers. Whether it's as a result of the name or whether it's simply because of the time of year, the tradition is that on Palm Sunday there should be fresh flowers on family graves. So the custom is to visit all the family graves on the Saturday before. It's not just to place flowers on the graves but to do a bit of tidying – cleaning the gravestone and clearing the debris left by winter storms. But not this year. Visiting graveyards to place flowers in memory of our ancestors is not a necessity under the social isolation legislation. The tradition may not just be about remembrance. Walking through a flower filled churchyard for a service bring to mind the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, just as church processions with waving palms do in other parts of the world. But none of that will happen this year – even Jerusalem is closed to pilgrims. We won't be re-enacting the journey made by Jesus.

Jesus was on a pilgrimage, joining many others making their way to the temple for the feast of the Passover. Pilgrims were coming together from all parts of Judea and Galilee so there was hustle and bustle and crowds of people. Jesus on a donkey might have felt the hooves slipping on the steep cobbled pathway but people threw down their coats and tore off branches to trees so the journey continued. And there was singing. In keeping with tradition the pilgrims were singing the Songs of ascent, some of what we today know as the Psalms. As Jesus came among them those traditional words found their focus, and many recognised them as referring to the prophet who rode among them.

At least that's what we understand, with hindsight. If we think about how the feelings of the crowd seemed to change over the week, we might wonder whether in fact the singing and the words chosen were simply a matter of people following tradition. Did the crowd really think of Jesus as their Messiah or were they just doing what they were used to doing? We don't know, but what we do know is that what happened afterwards cast a very different light on the event. The new Christian community understood this to be the first step in Christ's coming into glory. From there new traditions developed.

By now those are old traditions and this year we won't be able to participate in them. We won't be able to gather in crowds, walk through paths scattered with flowers or wave palms as we sing in processions. Maybe though, our enforced social distancing will give us much needed time to stop and think. What exactly does our celebration of Palm Sunday mean? Is it just another tradition? Will we revert to our processions next year or will we have become comfortable with virtual celebration? Who knows?

Whatever changes we might make to our traditions, though, let's remember, this year more than ever, what that journey into Jerusalem set in motion. This was the turning point for human hope. Over the coming week we will follow Jesus to his lowest point only to emerge into new life. That new life is the promise which is ours to look forward to today. So as we face the fears of this week may we give thanks and bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.