

Palm Sunday 2012

We have two readings from Mark's gospel. Each describes a crowd. There is the enthusiastic crowd of people who cheer Jesus when he enters Jerusalem on the donkey, and there is the mob that jeers at him on the cross. To which one would we have belonged?

We are here presumably because we think that there's truth in Holy Scripture and in the story that we'll hear over the next week. There are plenty of people in the world, even in this country, who jeer at us for doing so. Whether or not you think that these events are factual or fictional, there is no doubt that they say something profound about what it is like to be human. Peter tells lies to get him out of a tight spot, Judas betrays a friend for money, Pilate washes his hands to court favour with others, and the psychology of the crowd demonstrates mob justice at its worst. We see all this on the news every week. Look at politics: denials, lies, wriggling, taking money, cowardice. Which brings me back to today's readings.

At the time Our Lord was riding a colt into Jerusalem from one direction, from the opposite direction, history books tell us, another procession was arriving. At Passover the Jewish people celebrate deliverance from the *Egyptian* oppressors. But here they are now under *Roman* oppressors. A recipe for civil unrest. The Romans were nervous. So the Roman governor rode to Jerusalem from the 'capital' Caesarea on the coast, with military reinforcements in case of trouble. Pilate's procession, arriving from the west, was a procession of Roman imperial power. Jesus entered the city from the east in another procession. Whereas Pilate rides a war horse, Jesus rides a donkey. The contrast: Jesus against Pilate, non-violence of the God's kingdom against violence of empire. Mockery of imperial power. Turning the tables of convention as much as turning the tables in the Temple. There's a scene in Attenborough's film *Gandhi* which always catches my attention, and that is when the ship docks in Bombay, some British bigwig is disembarking in full dress uniform to the sounds of bands and military display. At the same time, Gandhi dressed as a local is disembarking further up the quayside. The crowds are with Gandhi, not the Viceroy. In Jerusalem, the crowds are with the itinerant preacher from Galilee.

I wonder which procession we will be part of? Will we part of the naked emperor's procession that lusts for power, that fawns over those who have it? that fiddles expenses claims? Or will we be part of the procession of straightforwardness, of humility, of service? Are we part of the small procession from the east, or the large and powerful one from the west? Are we part of the procession of truth and right, or the procession of bullying and force?

Crowds are notoriously unstable. A group of football fans that is at one moment enjoying a match with relaxed cheerfulness can easily become a threatening mob. To be in a big group of people can feel like belonging to a community. But you can be sucked up into a gang in which you lose your individuality and consent to terrible deeds. Think of Nazi rallies, sweeping people up into hatred.

Today we begin Holy Week, and we are invited to become holy. Holy people grow into an independence of mind and heart that protect them from the seductions of the mob. A saint is someone who, by the grace of God, is becoming the person whom God created them to be. Someone who, as I said last week, uses his gifts and skills make the world a better place. Someone who increases delight in the world.

Often we give in to off-the-peg identities, and try to find ourselves in the role models of society. Celebrities attract vast adulation, and thousands wish to belong to their 'community' through Twitter or Facebook. By associating with them, wearing their clothes, supporting their team, we may hope to find ourselves. It never works. Saints take the risk of being themselves, the unique friend of God that they are. They are non-conformist.

The crowd that cheers Jesus as he enters Jerusalem is drawn by his charisma. They sing 'Hosanna', which means 'Save us'. They escort him into the city. But the crowd that mocks him, some of them maybe the same people, taunts him with his powerlessness.

The powerful attract us. We hope that by being with them, we may catch some of their vigour and stave off the dread that we are worth nothing. The powerless can also evoke strong reactions, like vultures circling a wounded animal. When celebrities fall, the media smell blood.

As we begin Holy Week, it is worth asking how we respond to power and its loss. Do we home in on the strong people, letting bullies get their way because we haven't the courage to stand up to them? Do we distance ourselves from the weak and despised? Or do we dare to be non-conformist and follow the King who 'being found in human form humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross'? He gathers around himself a community in which we find a multitude of brothers and sisters, but in which each one of us can dare to be ourselves, fully human, made in the image of God.

The choice is between cheering and jeering.