

Palm Sunday 2020

Fr Peter Groves

Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Matthew 21.8

As we begin Holy Week in isolation and separation from each other, no doubt many of us are spending more time than usual watching rather than participating – watching films or television programmes, connecting with people via screens and the internet, looking out of windows and up and down streets and imagining the activity which is not there. The drama of Holy Week also requires a great deal of watching. Usually, that watching takes place within a drama we enact ourselves by way of the liturgy. Today, we are unable to do much acting. So let us watch, as the scene unfolds.

The roads are heaving. The city is small. The time of the festival has come round again, and it seems the whole world is trundling and bustling its way towards one of those ancient gates. The buzz runs both ways, back through the miles of travellers, forward into the sanctuary itself. Gradually but incessantly the noise rises. Crowds are their own internet, word spreads quickly. The one from the north, the healer from Galilee, the man from Nazareth, he is on his way.

Those who are behind him meet those whom he has met. People coming out of Jericho bump into two crazed beggars who are part of the party. At least they look like beggars. In fact, they look a great deal like two blind beggars who used to sit on the Jericho-Jerusalem road. But they are not those beggars, they cannot be, because they are not blind. They can see, and they have joined those following the Nazarene. It's hard to make out what they are shouting about amid all the chaos and confusion, but they seem to be saying something about healing, something about seeing again, something about light and life and vision. Something about miracles. Something about God.

Up and down the endless snaking lines the shouts echo and the rumours hiss. In the distance, heading towards the city, is a small group. Not a great procession of mounted soldiers, nor a litter of curtained aristocrats, just some men and women surrounding a man seated on a donkey. The beast stumbles a little, unsure of its footing, uncertain of its place in this most ragtag of retinues. All around people are crying out, like football fans and probably just as drunk. The man in the midst of it all seems calm. He is not crying out. He is not geeing them up or urging them on. He is silent, looking ahead of himself, looking towards the city, looking longingly, anxious to get there and yet perhaps just a little afraid, afraid of all this fuss, afraid of where it might lead, afraid of who might hear and what they, hearing, might think.

Now the city is in sight and there is more commotion. People rush to the walls, out of the gates, along the tracks. People leave their stalls and their stock and their animals and try to get a glimpse of him. Those who are following and those who are receiving mingle into one morass of febrile enthusiasm, a fervour of welcome and suspicion, of acclaim and demand at once. Who is this man, and what can he do for us, for you and for me? What can he offer to those whose daily grind is hunger and whose only home is captivity? They know the scriptures. "Behold, your King is coming to you: humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt the foal of donkey." Is he really the one? Is this it? Have we got there at last? The sceptic who has seen it all before is elbowed aside by the youngster who wants a better view. The prophecy of Zechariah! The Son of David, the king of the Lord's own kingdom! Acknowledge him as such. Lay down your garments, take off your cloaks and spread them on the roads, hack down the branches of the trees and wave palms before him, this is the man, this is the one, this is the moment, our moment, Hosanna.

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What a spectacle. What a fuss. The donkey totters forward. The trees are stripped of their branches and the leaves are waved before him. The people throw down their

clothing, glad to see it trampled underfoot, caught up in the moment, bewitched by the rumour which has become a certainty, drunk with the trickle which has become a flood. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Blessed indeed. Happy, fortunate, blessed. He has what he needs. He needs these people and he needs their passion. He needs the crowds who think they know, he needs the yells which drown their reason. He needs them here and now, and he needs them tomorrow and the next day. He needs them to shout, to bay, to be certain, to be angry, to hail, to acclaim, to slander and to condemn. And he needs them to spread their garments and he needs them to cut down those trees. For they will stand shouting before him again. And their clothing will be his shroud, and their branches will be his cross.