

Hosanna to the Son of David

Matthew 21.9.

‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ they cried as Jesus entered Jerusalem. That title had very ancient roots. It means, at the very basic level, that Jesus was descended from David – a fact Matthew is at pains to point out in the very opening words of his Gospel - The genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.’ The way that expression was used in the Old Testament led it its being used by many as a name for the coming Messiah, the anointed one coming from God to sort things out for his people and his world. On that Palm Sunday, there is little doubt that the majority of people shouting it had in mind that second way of understanding.

But in the crowd there was a variety of people. There were no doubt some close followers of Jesus, who had already begun to grasp what it was that Jesus himself meant by being ‘Messiah’. They had begun to get some glimmerings of understanding about what Jesus meant when he talked about his Kingdom. Then there were various people who, for a variety of reasons, hoped that this might be the Messiah. There were those who were thrilled at the way Jesus had stood up to the Roman invaders and occupiers of their country, and they hoped now for the beginnings of an armed struggle. There would be those who were excited by the way Jesus had breathed new life into their religion – and made fools of the nit-picking religious lawyers who made life a misery for them. They were probably some who had been healed by Jesus, or had witnessed the healing of others, and so saw there was something very special about this man. Probably there were some there who came from the Essene community down by the Dead Sea at Qumran – the people who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. They had their own particular take on what the Messiah would be like. And no doubt there were lots of others with yet more preconceptions about the Son of David. All these various people were looking at the same man, and shouting the same words, if Matthew’s account is to be believed...and yet as we have already begun to see, in their mind’s eye, as opposed to their physical eyes, they were all seeing something quite different.

As we begin to celebrate Holy Week, it is probably healthy to remember that the same will be true in this year of our Lord 2026. There will be people very genuinely celebrating these Holy Days, but who actually will be celebrating very different things, but using the same words. We need to remember that there are several ancient and very respectable, and yet in some ways contradictory interpretations of what the death of Jesus is all about.

Some can see it only as a propitiatory sacrifice to satisfy the demands of a righteous God. Others find that view immoral, but see what happened as the most powerful demonstration of the total love of God for mankind that could be imagined. Some Christians will celebrate Easter with total literalism. But others will deny the bodily resurrection but be just as sure of the truth of the Easter message despite that.

If we find ourselves in one camp or another, as inevitably we must, then we can also find ourselves saying of others 'But they have missed the point' – forgetting that they are probably saying exactly the same about us. Here is ground for Christian debate and engagement and learning for centuries to come.

But in the meantime we all join in one shout – 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again'. Just as on Palm Sunday the cry 'Hosanna to the Son of David' didn't mean exactly the same to everyone who said, no more will that cry of Christian affirmation. That we say it together, with our multiplicity of understandings is not a weakness, but a strength. On Palm Sunday no-one could have completely and with total satisfaction explained Jesus – but they were compelled from their inner being to welcome him.

No-one today can completely and with total satisfaction explain Jesus, despite having considerably greater evidence to go on. But still we want to affirm our faith in him. That is a cause for great celebration, and reminds us, as we constantly need to be reminded, that our faith is not a series of intellectual propositions that we can assent to or dissent from, but rather a relationship of love and trust. Jesus rode into Jerusalem offering to people the opportunity to make of him what they could

To those of us who have in one way or another made something of him – to the extent that we call ourselves his followers, his people, the cry is just as it was on Palm Sunday 'Hosanna' – which means something like 'Thank God for you' or 'Bless you.'

I invite you this Holy Week to join in once again seeing what we make of this man who rode into Jerusalem on the donkey, and try to puzzle out a bit more of what the Son of Man, this Son of David really is. We may come with scepticism, bewilderment or faith, or very probably some mixture of all three. That is fine – we are only human, and we can't have it all clear. But somewhere in all our different glimpses of the truth is the whole truth which is God's truth. We will meet him this week in different places – in an Upper Room on Thursday, at a hill called Golgotha on Friday, and in a garden next Saturday night and Sunday morning. I would encourage you to make an effort to be in all those places – to be part of meeting with Jesus on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Eve and Easter Day. Let's deepen and broaden our understanding of who the Son of David is, and bid him welcome into the city of our lives.