25 March 2018: Matins
Palm Sunday
Psalm 61; Zechariah 9: 9–12; 1 Corinthians 2: 1–12
The Venerable Martin Gorick, Archdeacon of Oxford

What you see is what you get.

Wizziwig at one time was the new big thing. When computers and word processors were still in their infancy, the concept of Wizziwig was a great step forward. When the document you eventually printed on paper, looked exactly the same as the document that you had created on screen. What you see is what you get, or Wisywyg.

It’s become a powerful sales tool in other areas of life too. When you see glossy photos of hotels these days, you can usually check out the reality through online reviews. In the old days there was often a huge mismatch between the sunkissed apartment in the brochure, and the half built hut on a building site that was sometimes the reality! That can still happen of course, but the power of online reviews make that much less likely. What you see is what you get, it matches up to reality. In theory at least.

There have been some big news stories this week. Does what we see in the news match up to reality? The poisoning of two Russians in Salisbury has been deeply shocking. An extreme example of behaviour that seems to ripple out from Putin’s regime. What we see is what we have come to expect. But spying and extra-judicial killing have always featured in international relations, and our country is not immune from such activity itself. But when it happens, in a far off country though a Drone strike, it doesn’t tend to trouble our media, or most of us either.

News is selective. It has limited time and resources to understand and report on what is going on. The tragedy of Eastern Ghouta in Syria has rightly received much coverage. But the equally brutal siege and conquest of Afrin has received very little. Afrin is a Kurdish town. When the Kurds have fought with us against ISIS, what we see is what we get, wonderfully brave men and women fighting for freedom. But the very same people are seen as terrorists by Turkey. What they see is what they get. An enemy.
And men, women and children are dying under their bombardment. We seem to do nothing to help our former allies, nor do we see much of their plight on TV.

The final story that I have been following is the Child Sex Abuse enquiry, focusing on events in Chichester Diocese. When you see a priest or Vicar like me. What do you think? I hope you assume we are trustworthy, prayerful, caring and close to God. I hope that clergy are all of these things, as I imagine you are too. But of course human beings are complex.

Sometimes clergy, like any human being, will be full of contradictions, ‘fightings within and fears without’ as the hymn puts it. In a tiny proportion of cases, a clergy person might appear powerful, or holy, even loving and gentle, but in reality be capable of the most awful abuse of other people, grooming children or vulnerable adults until they are able to abuse without fear of being caught. Abusers are found in every walk of life of course, but what we know now is they don’t look like monsters most of the time, they operate in plain sight. When I first left university I chose to spend a few months with a monk who was also a Bishop. I had heard him give the three hours devotion on Good Friday. He spoke of a Scheme where young people gave a year to God, learning to pray, to live in community and to serve the church. We got up at 5 every morning for an hour of silent prayer before worship and chores. We studied scripture, slept on the floor and lived a simple and I felt holy life. What I didn’t know until many years later was that same Bishop, Peter Ball, was a serial abuser of young men, and that he knowingly employed priests that he knew to be abusers too. It is an awful case that has hugely damaged many people. And I had no idea at the time that anything was wrong. As a church we have learnt so much, and our procedures are immeasurably better and safer now. But they have been terrible lessons for us all to learn, and my heart goes out to anyone who has endured abuse like this. We can be misled. Our preconceptions can deceive us. What you see is not always what you get.

When people saw Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, what did they see?

The authorities saw a rabble rouser, a trouble maker. In less than a week they would put him to death. The Romans didn’t like trouble like that.
The religious leaders saw trouble too. Someone whose popularity was threatening the status quo, *their* status quo. This ragged pilgrim preacher dared to question their knowledge received from great colleges and at the feet of eminent teachers. What they saw in Jesus was a threat to their place in society. They would be calling for his death too. What they saw was what he got. Trouble.

The crowd on Palm Sunday saw something very different. They saw a hero. A man of the people. In a drab and dusty occupied territory they saw someone who seemed so wonderfully free. They glimpsed in Jesus a vision of another country, another life, a brighter future. They saw him as their liberator. And so they cheered him, they tore down branches to wave before him. They shouted ‘Hosanna to the Son of David.’ Because that’s what they saw in him too.

A mighty King, a freedom fighter like David who would somehow use his God given powers to drive out the hated Romans, and win Israel back for those it truly belonged to. He would bring their Independence Day. But what they saw was coloured by their own fantasy.

But what they saw that day, was not what they got. Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of David. But not in the way they had imagined. He had a calling from God, and yet his Kingdom was not of this world. In this Holy Week he was to be truly heroic, but not as they had imagined. He was to reveal true freedom but only as he allowed authorities to do their worst with him. He did not fight back. The crowd that shouted Hosanna on this Palm Sunday, will be screaming Crucify Him by Friday. He would bring true liberation that Good Friday, but not as they had imagined. And many hated him for that. What they saw was what they got. One more celebrity, fallen from grace.

Jesus was crucified, dead, defeated. Everyone could see that!

For three days anyway…

Because sometimes with Jesus, in the most wonderful of ways, what you see, is not always what you get.