



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

5 April 2020: Matins Sermon

Palm Sunday

Psalm 61; Zechariah 9:9–12; Luke 16:19-31

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+ ‘Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.’ (Zechariah 9:9)

In the peculiar circumstances of lockdown and isolation inside the walls of Christ Church, cut off from direct personal interaction even with my neighbours in Tom Quad, I have found some parts of our corporate life easier to maintain virtually than others. But today, Palm Sunday, is proving particularly difficult. I am not just missing my Chapter colleagues, the choir, the servers, and the whole wider congregation with whom I want to be worshipping. I miss the stiff, unyielding texture of the shiny palm cross in my hand; the curious gaze of Sunday shoppers, looking in through the open gates at the shivering figures gathering at the western edge of the Quad; and the noise of the wind blowing across the microphones into which the Sub Dean should be trying to gather us together in worship. But above all I miss the donkey.

In my mind’s eye, I can see her standing patiently under the arch with her handler on one side and a red-robed verger on the other; her head is slightly dropped but her ears are pricked, sensitive to the subtle changes in the mood of the people around her. She has a faint air of world-weariness, of having seen all this before, as she stands and waits for the procession to set off. I find myself wondering whether she might be looking forward to repeating last year’s remarkable feat of walking up the steps from the path round the quadrangle to stand on the plinth right outside the Cathedral.

As I picture her on the outskirts of Christ Church, I remember one of Mary Oliver’s poems from her collection *Thirst* called ‘The Poet Thinks about the Donkey.’

On the outskirts of Jerusalem
the donkey waited.
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,
he stood and waited.

When he had let himself be led away, and let the stranger mount, the poet continues:

Never had he seen such crowds!

And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.

Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.

Mary Oliver's poem speaks of course of the young donkey described in all four gospel accounts of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In Matthew's version, that narrative is portrayed as fulfilling the prophecy of our reading from Zechariah. The evangelist explained, when they had come near Jerusalem, to the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples ahead to the village to fetch the donkey and colt they would find tied up there, in order to fulfil what had been spoken by the prophet:

Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.¹

By quoting Zechariah, 'Look, your king is coming', Matthew made explicit what had only been implicit in Mark's account, namely that Jesus' entry as the meek and humble king fulfilled the earlier prophecy. Here, as elsewhere in Zechariah, we find a vision of Jerusalem at the centre of the destiny of the whole world, the place to which other nations would turn in the coming age. In a later chapter the prophet would announce that on the day of the Lord (understood in Jesus' day to mean the eschaton, the final event in the divine plan) 'On that day, the Lord's feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem on the east.' (Zech 14:4) The king who entered, triumphant and victorious in chapter 9 we should thus understand as the Lord himself, the divine warrior, triumphant (or vindicated, or even legitimate: the Hebrew allows of several interpretations) but also humble, a king of peace. In ancient warfare, horses were ridden; the choice of a donkey and colt made clear that the rule of this king, which would extend far beyond Judah, would be marked not so much by meekness as by peace.

When Jesus thus came into the city, seated on the ass and foal, a large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them before him; the crowds ahead and those that followed all shouted

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

Recognising Jesus as a prophet – although he was not yet known to the people of the city – the crowd recognised his Davidic lineage, hailed him in homage and quoted the psalmist (Ps 118:26).

Today, on Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week, the most solemn week of the Church's year, we should – together with Christians across the world – be participating in one of the most vivid

¹ Matthew 21:5; quoting Zechariah 9:9.

and engaging performative rituals of our shared liturgy. We should be re-enacting that triumphal, royal entry into Jerusalem which preceded Christ's betrayal and Passion. Led by our own donkeys, priests and people should process, carrying our palm branches and singing our own hosannas to the son of David. Yet today in Oxford and elsewhere, those processions will not take place. Donkeys all over the country have been stood down, their services no longer required.

The Church's liturgy is in essence performative. Through speaking, listening and singing, in the dialogues between officiants and people, gesture and movement, our worship is both enacted and at heart, participatory. In one of a series of essays in the *Church Times* in 2012 on poetry and the cross, Mark Oakley offered the vivid reflection that 'Liturgy is poetry in motion'. He reminded his readers of how from the early centuries Christians had dramatized the Passion of Christ in liturgies that used performative representation to make the events of Holy Week (and above all the Crucifixion) immediate to the congregation, 'communicating its truth in poetic forms, movement and space.'²

Oakley quoted the monk and theologian Honorius of Autun who, around the year 1100, likened the priest presiding at the eucharist to those who recite tragedies in the theatre, writing: 'In the same way our tragic author [the celebrant] represents by his gestures in the theatre of the church before the Christian people the struggle of Christ and teaches to them the victory of his redemption.'³ Note the crucial phrase within this sentence: the Eucharistic president does not perform in isolation, speaking the words and making the manual gestures into the void, he does so 'before the Christian people'.

Yet, on the two Sundays since the spread of the coronavirus in this country made it impossible for churches to gather congregations (or even clergy) within their walls, we have been encouraged in this diocese, and indeed across the Church of England, to participate in worship virtually by watching and listening to streamed celebrations by our bishops and other priests. The merits of Spiritual Communion (defined in the Book of Common Prayer in the context of communion for the sick) have been commended to us; many have found consolation in this, even though we do not receive the Sacrament with our mouth. Communion services will be streamed again today, and on the following Sundays for as long as this situation endures.

But on this particular Sunday, while we all miss our donkey and the ritual of processing singing hymns behind her, we might want, as well as participating in one of the eucharistic services on offer, to engage in a virtual procession. To join with our fellow worshippers in our mind's eye in the performative liturgy that has normally marked this day in the Church's calendar. If we do so, we will at the same time be making a virtual pilgrimage to the eastern side of the city of Jerusalem, to the Mount of Olives, from where Jesus entered the city on his donkey on the final

² Mark Oakley, 'The Cross shall be thy stage', *Church Times* 13 March 2012

³ Honorius of Autun, *Gemma animae*, quotation from O.B. Hardison, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore MD, 1965), p. 39.

journey that would lead him to his death.

Medieval Christians participated enthusiastically in the rituals of Holy Week, starting on this day with processions with palms. Preaching a sermon for this Sunday, the Anglo-Saxon homilist Ælfric of Eynsham described the ritual that his flock had just performed in words that resonate as much with a modern audience as with his own, one thousand years ago:⁴

It is the custom in God's church, established by its teachers, that everywhere in God's congregation the priest should bless palm-branches on this day, and distribute them, thus blessed, to the people; and God's servants should then sing the hymn which the Jewish people sang before Christ when he was coming to his Passion. Now we shall hold our palms until the singer begins the offering-song, and then we shall offer the palm to God because of what it signifies: a palm betokens victory. Christ was victorious when he overcame the mighty devil and rescued us, and we also shall be victorious through God's power.

So let us gather in our minds eye, with our palms held aloft. 'Those who cut down the branches of the trees and prepared Christ's way with them', Ælfric wrote, 'are the teachers in God's church, who pluck the sayings of the apostles and their successors and with them direct God's people to the faith of Christ, so that they may be prepared for his way'. Our own spiritual teachers have prepared us for the ritual we are to perform virtually, and we may readily recall suitable hymns with which to accompany our walk. In my head, I will be singing the wonderful medieval processional verses by Theodulf of Orleans 'All glory, laud, and honour' in the translation by J.M. Neale, to the tune known as St Theodulph. Ælfric went on

The people who walked before Christ, and those who followed him, all sang 'Osanna Filio David,' that is, in our language, 'Hail, Son of David.' Those who walked before Christ are the patriarchs and prophets, who lived before Christ's incarnation; those who went after him are those who turned to Christ after his birth, and daily turn to him. All these sing one hymn, because we and they all hold one faith.⁵

As we sing our one hymn, walking behind Christ into the crowded streets of Jerusalem in the seclusion and isolation of our own homes, let us never forget this one faith which we share, the faith and hope which bind us together as the body of Christ.

All glory, laud, and honour
to thee, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring.

⁴ Ælfric *Homilies*, XIV, ed. B. Thorpe; translated Eleanor Parker, <https://aclerkofoxford.blogspot.com/2013/03/palm-sunday-according-to-lfric.html>

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