

In the name of the Father...

I have always found Palm Sunday a rather disorientating way to begin Holy Week. It's not so much the donkeys and the palm-waving and the processions as the nagging question of who exactly we are identifying ourselves with as we take up our palms and sing our joyful "hosannas". The four evangelists can't seem to agree about exactly who makes up the merry band of revellers accompanying Jesus into Jerusalem. St Luke tells us, perhaps a little *too* confidently, that "the whole multitude of disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice". Matthew and Mark, on the other hand, are rather more circumspect, telling us simply that "those who went before" Jesus cried out with a loud voice. St John however, makes it very clear that the crowd in the story is not a crowd of disciples at all, but rather another group of people entirely, one that comes *out* of the city to meet Jesus, much to the surprise of his disciples, who, by contrast, haven't got the faintest idea what is going on, and in general don't seem to be much in the mood for singing.

Whatever the precise truth is, St John, as is so often the case, has put his finger on the point of real significance in the story, a point which we, with our palm-waving and processions, are all-too-prone to overlook, which is that what we are celebrating in Jesus's so-called "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem is Jesus going somewhere his disciples very deeply do not want him to go. For, as we have seen in all of our readings this evening, and in their gradually darkening tone, for Jesus to enter Jerusalem will be for him to have to confront the full reality of human resistance to all that he has come to offer, the full force of the violence and hatred which is now marshalled against him. And, standing on the outskirts of the city of Jerusalem, the disciples are rightly afraid about what exactly is awaiting their master within.

And perhaps it is not only their master they are afraid for. Perhaps at some level the disciples also recognise that the trial Jesus is about to undergo in Jerusalem will be one in which their own discipleship will be put to the test, in which their own comforting self-delusions will be stripped from them leaving them stranded and bewildered.

It is traditional, in these days of rather lacklustre Holy Week observance, for the first address of the Holy Week preacher to be a kind of stump speech imploring you all to get yourselves to church. And far be it from me to depart from that venerable tradition. But if St John is right about the state of mind the disciples were in as they made their way into Jerusalem, then perhaps there is more in this story to give us pause than we have generally allowed. Perhaps at some level we too know that if we go with Jesus into Jerusalem then what are going to have to face there is a reality we are not at all prepared to confront, a reality too large, too disorientating for our quiet and orderly lives to accommodate.

So then, here at the outset of this most holy of weeks, let us make this our prayer “Come Lord and enter where we do not want you to go, expose the sham of our faith, because even though we are afraid of what we will find in Jerusalem, we know no other way than to follow where you are going.”

Amen.