

*Slide – Jesus on a donkey* At the start of this most significant week of the church's year I want us to consider 3 phrases as we celebrate this Palm Sunday – 'the cat is out of the bag', 'Jesus....who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross' (Hebrews 12.2) and 'laying forward'.

First, **'The cat is out of the bag'**. *Slide – cat and bag* When our grandchildren were staying with us recently my voice was rather croaky so I said, 'Ugh, I've got a frog in my throat.' They both looked alarmed, so I had to explain that this meant a froggy sound rather than the presence of an actual frog! If we look at Jesus' entry to Jerusalem we could say 'the cat is out of the bag' not meaning the unexpected appearance of a cat next to him, but that something that had been hidden or kept a secret was now out in the open. So, what was this secret? In Mark's gospel it's to do with who Jesus really is. Each time Jesus does something exciting like heal someone – the kind of thing you'd immediately want to tell everyone in the street- he tells whoever it is not to spread the news. Frequently, of course, they take no notice. Perhaps Jesus wanted people to have time to really ponder the significance of who he was – not to assume too quickly, not to label him too quickly (a miracle worker? Another John the Baptist?). Perhaps he was waiting for the right time to say who he was (in John's gospel Jesus says, 'My time has not yet come eg John 7.6). We can't say for certain. But on Palm Sunday Jesus lets the cat out of the bag, entering Jerusalem as though it's a city where he has the right to exercise authority. He doesn't slip in quietly. He doesn't tell the crowds to be quiet. He accepts a royal welcome – the equivalent of the red carpet and the road being cleared for him. He might even have waved at the crowds! He then goes straight to the temple, the heart of the religious establishment, just as the prophet Malachi had prophesied; 'then suddenly the Lord whom you seek will come to his temple' (Malachi 3.1). He is alerting the authorities to his presence in no uncertain terms. The cat is out of the bag.

Now, **'for the joy that was set before him...'** *Slide – Joy* Jesus knew what lay ahead of him in Jerusalem. He'd warned his disciples more than once about his suffering and death, though they had refused to take the message seriously. Many of our hymns on Palm Sunday anticipate the events of Good Friday – 'Rise on, ride on in majesty, in lowly pomp ride on to die'; its words and rhythm evoking a funeral procession. Similarly 'Drop, drop slow tears' which will be sung during Communion. However, a hymn like 'Make way, make way....' Strikes a different note; one with a more joyful, even triumphant sound. Liturgically we face a challenge – do we focus more on the joyful sound of the crowds welcoming Jesus that first Palm Sunday, or on the agony that lies ahead? Or do we try to do both? I'll come back to that.

I want to suggest that for Jesus on that day he was joyful; not a messiah bowing his head in grief as one anticipating the ultimate sacrifice, but as one who could at last achieve what he had been called to accomplish. Perhaps you've had the experience of looking ahead to something that was likely to be a big challenge – an exam? An operation? A move? An interview? As the date gets nearer you may feel even more apprehension. Then on the day itself there can be a sense of relief – at last you are about to move through it! I suspect there was something like this for Jesus. He had said earlier on to his disciples (Luke 12.50) 'I have a baptism to be baptised with, and

how I am constrained until it is accomplished!'. During his ministry he had been paving the way for this last week of his life, and, as the time for its completion draws closer, he approaches it not with doom and gloom, but with joy. At last the kingdom would be inaugurated, the experience of God's deliverance, celebrated at Passover was about to be repeated. He is happy for this to be acknowledged in the shouts of the crowd and in the royal welcome he's given. No more playing down of that identity that we see earlier on in Mark's gospel. No more constraints. The cat was out of the bag. At last his time had come! The climax of his ministry was in sight. He could identify with the joy of the crowds.

Now, **'laying forward'**. This was a favourite phrase of my Dad's foster mum whom we called Nanna. What Nanna meant by this was preparing for what might lie ahead, whether that was storing up enough bars of soap in case of sudden shortage, or tins of food in case rationing started again. Essentially it was about being prepared.

Interestingly, more than half of our gospel reading this morning is taken up not with describing Jesus' joyful procession, but with how Jesus was laying forward, not just for his arrival in Jerusalem, but for that all important last meal with his disciples. He'd already booked his transport into Jerusalem – sensible at Passover time because many donkeys would already have been reserved by their owners. He'd also hired a room for his last meal with his disciples. Homely details, if you like, but Mark's way of making clear that all was intentional, deliberate and, by implication, in accordance with God's plan. There was nothing random about it. Notice that when the disciples went to collect the donkey, they found it in exactly the circumstances Jesus had described- reminding me of Luke's recording in his gospel of the shepherds going off to Bethlehem to see baby Jesus, following the angels' message and finding him 'just as they had been told' (Luke 2.20). God's hand was clearly at work.

So, in our worship on Palm Sunday we have a mixture of joy and grief, with different churches placing more emphasis on one than on the other. We also receive an invitation to 'lay forward' for Holy Week as we take up our palm crosses. Just look at your palm cross now. This year the palms come from India – a reminder of the links we have with Christians in that part of the world. More than that, though, they are a reminder to us as we hold them, look at them, walk outside with them, that Holy Week is a time of holding together these two apparently conflicting emotions – joy and grief. There can be a tendency to feel that because of terrible things going on in the world, or because of suffering in our family or among our friends, that it would be heartless to express or even feel joy. Yet we see both in Jesus (joy here on Palm Sunday, grief in Gethsemane and on the cross) and he wasn't living in a sort of rural bubble but under a political regime that was about to torture and execute him. We easily view things in terms of either /or, rather than both/and. Yet to be fully human is to be both/and. Whether we like it or not human life is a mixture of suffering and happiness. Jesus invites us to enter into that as we follow him through Holy Week, sharing in his confidence that it is God who is ultimately in charge of his journey, and by implication, our journey; a confidence that is validated by the resurrection. slide-  
*Jesus in glory*

So, let's take up our palm crosses and stick with Jesus like a limpet through Holy Week with grief and joy, ready for another cat to be let out of the bag – the resurrection! That demonstration that all through Holy Week it was God who was really in charge and not the Romans or the Jewish authorities.

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