

Sermon for Sunday, April 9, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

I will always remember
how Palm Sunday was celebrated
in the first parish I was part of
here in the Episcopal Church.
Because we had
real donkeys.

The donkeys stood in front of the altar.
It had taken some convincing
to get them up the steps of the church
but now they stood quietly,
the big one
snuffling at the altar linens
and the little one
nuzzling his owner's pockets in a search for more treats.

You could just about touch
the excitement in the air:
kites whirling around on poles,
triangles jangling,
and every now and then
a small hand reached out
and warily stroked the coarse donkey hair.

“Hosanna!”, was the shout, “Hosanna
to the Son of David!
Blessed is he/the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna!”

And with a fanfare
the music burst out:
“Ride on, ride on in majesty”
we sang
as the donkeys were led out of the church -
because as fun as it was
re-enacting Palm Sunday

with the help of real live donkeys,
there was always the fear
that they might eat the palms
or do something worse
on the carpet,
and above all,
they were a distraction
as we headed into the solemnity
of the Passion.

“Ride on, ride on,
in majesty,
“in lowly pomp
ride on to die.”

Down the aisle
out of the church
and out of our lives .
“Ride on,” we sang,
“go your way.”
The party was over
the parade
had passed,
life could go on
as usual.
“Ride on.”

Because when it comes down to it, for many of us,
Palm Sunday
is an interruption.
We can't even begin our worship
in the way we have always done,
finding our seats,
kneeling in prayer,
and rising to sing.
Instead
we begin in confusion,
people pushing palms into our hands,
bulletins getting in the way,
and everyone milling about,

looking for someone
to bring order to the chaos.
And when we finally find our seats
we have no time to get settled;
it is on to the next thing,
and somehow
we never quite seem
to catch up;
we're never ready
for the meal we share with Christ
and then that terrible story
that pushes us into
Holy Week,
without time to prepare ourselves fully.

Palm Sunday interrupts
the steady
silent
progression of days,
the solemn movement from Lent
into Holy Week.
And it interrupts our lives,
with its foolish talk
of a king.

We
don't like
interruptions.

And nor did they
in Jerusalem.
It wasn't the first time,
as Matthew tells it,
that news of his coming
had shaken the city
to its very bones,
it wasn't the first time
that questions about his identity
had thrown it into turmoil.

Remember
the first time?
Way back there
at the beginning of Matthew, when
the wise men came
in search of a king.
It wasn't just Herod
who was afraid that day, afraid for his throne,
it was the people as well,
all Jerusalem
afraid of what the coming
of this King
might mean.

But he never arrived. The King never came.
Not the one they were expecting, not then.
Jerusalem
was saved.
Life could go on
as usual.

And now
he was coming
again.
Thirty years later,
and the rumors began.
“Haven't you heard? That man is coming,
Jesus they call him.
There's something about him, something...I'm not sure...
But I've heard people say
he's a prophet
maybe even the messiah.
Do you think...?”
The city
was rocked by the rumors, it was thrown into turmoil.
It was as if an earthquake
had shaken the very foundations loose.

A king was coming, and no one knew
quite what to expect.

Because this king brought no imperial escort,
this king had no royal throne.

This king came
seated on a donkey,
and the only entourage
was the fickle crowd shouting “hosanna,”
as easily as they would later
call for crucifixion.
By anyone’s standards,
this king
was no king at all.

Which is perhaps what makes us so ready
to move on from Palm Sunday.
We have learnt our faith well,
we know the way things are supposed to be.
This man was born for death,
and it is time to move on.
Because we have become acquainted with death,
we have made our peace with a crucified Jesus,
scapegoat for an oppressor’s fears.
It is painful,
but it is predictable.
That is how the story is supposed to be.

But that is not this story.
Because this is not just a respite
from the intensity of the emotion of death,
but a breaking in of something new.

Here we catch a glimpse of who this Jesus really is.
He is not just a great teacher
submitting quietly to a violent
but holy death.
He is the king,
in the lineage of David,
a bearer of salvation.

And it is not the leaders of the nations
 who claim him as their king,
but a motley collection of passers-by
 from the outskirts of a city,
and a small group of followers,
 fishermen and tax collectors and the like,
paving his way
 not with red carpets
but the rough green of branches
and a few homespun coats.

And that is the scandal of Palm Sunday.
We are prepared for Holy Week,
we are prepared for death.
But we are not so prepared
 for the sudden arrival
of the king who is no king.
It interrupts our lives,
it breaks into the way
that we are accustomed to viewing our faith.

Because if God once worked that way,
then there is always the possibility
that God might do it again.
It leaves open the possibility
that God might break into our world,
interrupting our lives,
changing the definitions,
granting us a glimpse of something
wholly new.
It leaves open the possibility
 – if only we can welcome the interruption
 and see it for what it really is,
the coming of God among us.

Perhaps that's why Palm Sunday is for the children.
Because anyone who has spent any time around children,
knows that children have a keen sense of incongruity,
that often for them
it is the interruptions

that are the high points of life.
Perhaps that's exactly why,
as Matthew tells it,
long after the crowds have left
and the story of Holy Week
has begun its relentless journey towards death,
and Jesus is in the temple turning tables,
the children are still there, shouting "Hosanna".