

Palm Sunday, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

“Hosannah, LORD, hosannah! *
LORD, send us now success.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; *
we bless you from the house of the LORD.”

Of all the words in the psalm that we read as processed into the church today,
these are the ones that ring in our minds.
We know them so well.
We say a version of them every week
as part of the Eucharist,
and then every year on Palm Sunday,
as we echo the crowds
welcoming Jesus
into Jerusalem.

But this psalm
had a history
before the time of Jesus.
It was used as a liturgical cornerstone
in a service of thanksgiving,
thanksgiving for being rescued by GOD.
It may have been sung
on the safe and victorious return
of the king and his armies
from a successful campaign.
They came back and processed in triumph
into the city, into the temple
to give thanks to God
for deliverance from their enemies.
Or perhaps it was used at the end
of a long and dangerous journey.
It certainly came to be used
at the end of the celebration of the Passover,
a reminder of the way God sustained and protected and led the people
out of Egypt
into the promised land.
Whatever the occasion,
this psalm

is full of praise for God
for a safe arrival,
a return home,
full of blessing.
And it carries with it the idea
that the one who is coming into the city
has been on God's work,
the one who is coming into the city
comes in God's name and with God's approval.

It begins by thanking God,
the God who is merciful,
who does not give us what we deserve
but who is gracious and generous and blesses us.
It begins by thanking God
and reminding the people
never to forget
what God has done.

And then our prayer book had us jump
to the second half of the psalm,
skipping over the psalmists
memories of distress, skipping over
the memories of enemies,
going direct to the place of thanksgiving,
the gates of righteousness.
We are at the temple,
we are here ready to give thanks
to the God who has rescued us, the God who has saved us.
And all that
in spite of the odds.
God has turned things around;
what was rejected
has been welcomed;
what was feared
has been redeemed.
And the one who comes in the name of God -
and it's not entirely clear who it is -
perhaps it is the king, come in glory,
perhaps it is the people, rescued from Egypt,
perhaps it is the priest, come to lead worship -
but whoever it is, it is one who is doing God's work -
the one who comes in the name of the Lord

is blessed
And God,
the psalmist's own God,
is to be thanked.

That's psalm one hundred eighteen,
that's what the people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem
were quoting.

And reading those words in context
we discover
that when the crowds say "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"
they aren't just saying,
"Welcome to Jerusalem, Jesus."
They are suggesting
that this man
has survived against the odds,
this man
has been on God's work,
this man
is coming home to safety,
a visible sign
of the blessing of God.

But the irony,
the irony that we can see in hindsight,
the irony is
that Jerusalem was not to be a safe place for Jesus.
It's almost as if the psalm is turned back to front.
Jerusalem
is, for Jesus, the place of danger,
Jerusalem
is where he will do God's ultimate work,
Jerusalem is where
only God
can save him.

Today we enter that week that we call holy,
following the last days
of our Lord and Savior.
We begin here, on Palm Sunday,
and will travel with Christ
though Jerusalem

to the upper room,
the cross, the tomb.

We will join with the people who welcome him into the city,
as we give thanks to God in the Eucharistic prayer
with their words,
Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

And then we will hear
the awful truth.
How the same people
who cried Hosanna to welcome the Messiah
into Jerusalem
a few short days
joined with his enemies
in another cry.
“Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”

And, perhaps, we will wonder,
what would we have done
if we had been there?
Would we have joined the crowds
celebrating, welcoming him into Jerusalem?
Would we have followed him that week,
as he taught daily in the temple,
hanging on his every word?
Would we have joined him at the upper room
for that final last meal,
and then
in the garden
of Gethsemane?
Would we have stood at the foot of the cross
praying, waiting, keeping vigil?

I suspect the answer, the answer that is so difficult to admit to ourselves
is that we would not.
We would have been there welcoming him in, yes,
and maybe the first day or so in the temple,
excited at seeing
God at work among us.
But then ordinary life
would have got in the way.
We would have forgotten

how unusual that procession was
into the city.
We would have assumed
there was plenty of time ahead
to hear his words of wisdom.
We would have let the everyday things around us
distract us
from what was unfolding before our eyes.
And maybe, afraid of our friends and employers and neighbors and families,
afraid of the consequences
of being associated with him
maybe we would even
have joined the crowd in their shouts
“Crucify him, crucify him.”

This week
I invite you
to follow Jesus.
Not just
today
as we celebrate his triumphant arrival into Jerusalem,
but all week,
praying,
reading,
worshipping.
I invite you to join us Maundy Thursday
as we remember his last meal with his friends,
and Good Friday
as we keep vigil at the foot of the cross.
And then, on Easter,
after the weight of those final days
to know the joy
of resurrection.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.