

Sermon for Sunday, March 29, 2015  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It was a once in a lifetime event,  
once in many lifetimes.  
This week  
the body of King Richard III  
was welcomed to his final resting place  
in Leicester Cathedral,  
more than five hundred years  
after his death  
at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485.

If you've been following this somewhat bizarre story,  
you'll know that when he died,  
the last Plantagenet monarch  
killed in the last major battle of the Wars of the Roses  
by the forces of the man who was to take over the throne  
as King Henry VII,  
Richard's body was hurriedly buried in a monastery in Leicester,  
some thirteen miles away.  
Fifty or so years later,  
as part of his program of reform,  
Henry VII's son, Henry VIII,  
dissolved the monastery  
and all evidence of Richard's burial place was lost.  
It wasn't until 2012  
that a skeleton was found  
under a city parking lot,  
and after historical and DNA evidence was examined,  
it was concluded that this was indeed the last mortal remains  
of Richard III.

Last Sunday  
his body was carried in procession  
from Bosworth Field  
to Leicester Cathedral,  
where he was interred on Thursday  
with all the traditional rites

befitting a monarch.

The procession itself  
was full of pageantry,  
the King's Guards in full regalia  
accompanying the coffin,  
schoolchildren holding heraldic banners,  
re-enactors in Tudor fashion and shining suits of armor,  
and bystanders carrying white roses and taking photos with their cell phones.  
And all this  
for a five-hundred-and-thirty-year-dead king  
of dubious repute.

You can't help but compare it  
with the welcome that awaited Jesus  
as he entered the city of Jerusalem  
that first Palm Sunday.  
There was no King's Guard,  
but around him  
a dozen of his closest friends,  
men who had given up everything  
to follow him  
the last three years,  
men  
who were prepared  
to defend him  
with their lives  
if necessary.  
Remember how he told them  
that he would die  
and be raised in three days,  
and Peter,  
Peter the impetuous,  
told him that it couldn't happen, that he couldn't be talking like this.  
And Peter it was  
later that week  
who in the garden, when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus,  
Peter took out his sword  
and cut off a man's ear.  
He would do anything

to defend his Lord.  
 Perhaps not a kings guard,  
 but a guard of honor  
 all the same.

And the children were there too,  
 no heraldic banners  
 but waving fresh cut branches,  
 palms, and likely olives,  
 and the red anemones and yellow daisies  
 that burst out in color in spring.

There were no re-enactors,  
 but the bystanders  
 took off their cloaks  
 and spread them on the ground  
 a makeshift carpet  
 for a king.

And they shouted, "Hosanna!  
 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!  
 Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

And I can't help but imagine  
 they also shouted that psalm  
 traditionally used  
 at the coronation of a new king,

"Lift up your heads, O gates;  
 lift them high, O everlasting doors; \*  
 and the King of glory shall come in.  
 "Who is this King of glory?" \*  
 "The LORD, strong and mighty,  
 the LORD, mighty in battle."  
 Lift up your heads, O gates;  
 lift them high, O everlasting doors; \*  
 and the King of glory shall come in.  
 "Who is he, this King of glory?" \*  
 "The LORD of hosts,

he is the King of glory.”

It’s an echo of the song of the angels  
 “Glory to God in the highest heaven”  
 an echo of the wise men asking King Herod,  
 “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”,  
 an echo of the words that Jesus told his disciples  
 if anyone queried them about taking the donkey.  
 “Look, your king is coming to you,  
 humble, and mounted on a donkey.”

And a foretaste,  
 a foretaste of the crowds in the city, asking,  
 ‘Who is this?’  
 and the mocking accusation at his trial,  
 “Hail. King of the Jews!”

“Lift up your heads, O gates;  
 lift them high, O everlasting doors; \*  
 and the King of glory shall come in.  
 "Who is this King of glory?" \*  
 "The LORD, strong and mighty,  
 the LORD, mighty in battle."  
 Lift up your heads, O gates;  
 lift them high, O everlasting doors; \*  
 and the King of glory shall come in.  
 "Who is he, this King of glory?" \*  
 "The LORD of hosts,  
 he is the King of glory.”

And today,  
 today this king, this king who we welcome  
 with branches of palm  
 is the same one whose birth  
 we celebrated at Christmas,  
 the same one  
 who we will remember  
 on trial before Pilate  
 and hanging on the cross, a sign over his head,  
 “the King of the Jews.”

So what shall we do?  
 Wave our palm fronds  
 and take them home,  
 tucked away to shrivel and die?  
 Or join in the procession,  
 through the city gates,  
 and on, on  
 to death.

Or as Andrew of Crete said in the eighth century

“Let us run to accompany him as he hastens toward his passion, and imitate those who met him then, not by covering his path with garments, olive branches or palms, but by doing all we can to prostrate ourselves before him by being humble and by trying to live as he would wish. Then we shall be able to receive the Word at his coming, and God, whom no limits can contain, will be within us.

... So let us spread before his feet, not garments or soulless olive branches, which delight the eye for a few hours and then wither, but ourselves, clothed in his grace, or rather, clothed completely in him. We who have been baptized into Christ must ourselves be the garments that we spread before him.... Let our souls take the place of the welcoming branches as we join today in the children's holy song: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the king of Israel.”

or perhaps the seventeenth century poet and priest, George Herbert,

King of glory, King of peace,  
 I will love thee;  
 and that love may never cease,  
 I will move thee.  
 Thou hast granted my request,  
 thou hast heard me;  
 thou didst note my working breast,  
 thou hast spared me.

Wherefore with my utmost art  
 I will sing thee,  
 and the cream of all my heart  
 I will bring thee.  
 Though my sins against me cried,  
 thou didst clear me;  
 and alone, when they replied,

thou didst hear me.

Seven whole days, not one in seven,  
I will praise thee;  
in my heart, though not in heaven,  
I can raise thee.  
Small it is, in this poor sort  
to enroll thee:  
e'en eternity's too short  
to extol thee.