

Palm Sunday ... What we expected? ...

... or more than we bargained for?

A reflection given on Palm Sunday, 2nd April 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 21:1-11

Earlier this week Ben our Youth Minister ordered some card for the family day tomorrow from Amazon. Imagine his surprise when the delivery from Amazon that turned up was not a ream of card, but a cot mattress. I know Sarah is expecting another baby in August, but I think the family already has a cot mattress, so who knows where this came from? It just seems that when you place an order with Amazon, you don't always get what you expect. On the 6 May we shall be crowning a new king. Most of us have only known one monarch. Our expectations have been shaped by the late Queen's own personal style. But Charles will inevitably be different. There are many ways in which he might surprise us. So if we're expecting an exact replica of Queen Elizabeth, we might not get what we expect.

And on Palm Sunday, we remember how Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph because people were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, a king to lead them and overcome their enemies and save them from their captivity. The Son of David entered the City of David on a wave of expectation. But already there were signs that people might not be getting what they expected. This king was entering his city not on a war horse, but on a donkey. This king was attended not by a host of armed soldiers, but by a rag bag handful of disciples. This king came in triumph, but his authority seemed intangible: the power to forgive, the power to heal; to feed; to welcome and include. This king didn't behave in all the obvious kingly ways. So people were puzzled. The whole city, we're told, was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" They wanted and expected a king, but they didn't quite get what they expected.

And so the question inevitably turns to you and me. As you approach Holy Week and Easter, what do you expect of the Messiah, this anointed one of God? Do you think he's come to give you what you want or what you think you need? It's so easy, isn't it, to expect God to back us up with whatever we think is right? But God very rarely falls into line with what we think he should do.

Or do you think Jesus is coming to revive the Church, to inject some new religious energy? But if Holy Week tells us anything, it's that Jesus and religious leaders are rarely on the same page.

Maybe your expectations of the Messiah are actually quite low key. You don't really expect him to make much of a difference at all. But the story of Holy Week is surely that you can push

Jesus away, but he's very hard to get rid of: this is the 'jack in a box' God, because on the third day he always jumps back.

Where God is concerned, we don't always get what we expect. So maybe we should enter Holy Week in that spirit: expecting to be surprised; open to the discovery that there is more to God than we thought; ready to discover how we have been deceived by our own false images; misled by our own tunnel vision; and taken the wrong way by our own spiritual blindness.

So on this Palm Sunday, by all means, let's welcome the Messiah. But as we wave our palm branches, let's be aware that we may not be getting what we thought we were expecting - be aware that you might in fact get much more than you bargained for.

Reading Text

Matthew 21:1-11

¹ When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.'

⁴ This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵ 'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.' ⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' ¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' ¹¹ The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'