

A HOMILY FOR PALM SUNDAY

Matthew 21:1-11.

‘The crowds who went ahead of Jesus and those who followed shouted “Hosanna”’

How big is a crowd?

We are talking about Jerusalem in 30 AD. Scholars argue about its population. Let’s say about 30,000 people, swelled to perhaps as high as 90,000 with Passover pilgrims. Jerusalem ‘city’ was really no more than a small country town, normally a tenth of the population of Canberra, where I live, but now swelled for the festival. So how many people would it have taken to make up a noticeable crowd? Twenty? Fifty? A hundred would certainly have been very noteworthy.

Who was in this crowd?

Who jumped and danced and shouted to announce the coming of the man on the donkey?

Well, it was not the people of Jerusalem. We know from Luke’s Gospel that the excitement began well before the crowd reached there. (*Luke 19:37*). These were the people travelling with Jesus on his journey. And when they came over the brow of the Mount of Olives and finally caught a glimpse of Jerusalem across the valley, they burst into spontaneous celebration.

It is important to distinguish this crowd from the other crowd, the awful crowd that we will read of soon, as we approach Easter. This pilgrim crowd is not the same as the crowd baying for Jesus’ blood in the square a few days later. The use of the same word ‘crowd’ in both contexts has wrongly led some preachers to try to make a point about the fickleness of the ‘crowd’. These interpreters are taking a wrong path.

These pilgrims are Jesus’ followers, attracted to Jesus for a multitude of reasons, sensing that something important was about to happen, enthusiastically joining the ‘Jesus movement’ and willing to go wherever Jesus was going.

They were a very mixed bunch. For a start, the crowd obviously included Jesus’ twelve disciples but they were just Jesus’ inner circle. Jesus had many more disciples than that.

Firstly, there were the women. We know some of these women’s names – Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna. We are told that even from the beginning there were ‘many other women’. (*Luke 8:3*). Many men had come from Galilee too. Then there were people who had joined the procession on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem. Some of them were people whom Jesus had healed, thankful people who could do nothing other than follow him in awe and gratitude. Two of them were men healed of their blindness outside Jericho (*Matt 20:34*). One was named Bartimaeus. (*Mark 10:46*). But then there were all the unnamed ‘disciples’. Paul suggests that there were nearly 500 disciples. (*1 Cor 15:6*). Maybe we can take 500 as some kind of upper figure but whatever the number of people on the road with Jesus, it was certainly enough to gain the attention of the people of Jerusalem, including, as we well know, the close attention of the authorities.

Maybe a few curious people casually joined as the crowd moved closer to Jerusalem but this crowd was essentially made up of Jesus' followers. They were people like ourselves. They were ordinary people. They were people whose lives Jesus had touched. They were people whom Jesus had healed like Mary Magdalene and Bartimaeus. They were people attracted to Jesus and to his message like Peter, James and John, like Susanna and Joanna.

They were people like ourselves. Different kinds of people but all of them people who knew that there was more to know and to feel, much more for them to be than they had found so far in life as they knew it.

They were people of enthusiasm as they walked with Jesus, too many to be beside him, some ahead, some behind, all excited, people who thought something big was about to happen. They were right. Something big was indeed about to happen – something bigger than they could possibly imagine.

But before that would happen, they would think all their hopes were dashed, all their dreams of a better world destroyed. Many, perhaps all of them, expected some kind of revolution, some kind of beginning of a new regime, a new era. None of them knew that Jesus must first die

This was not a fickle crowd. They looked on in horror as the dreadful drama played out. They wept at the destruction of all that they had hoped for. They were not fickle but they did descend into despair. They went back to Galilee to take up fishing once more. They trudged back to little rural villages like Emmaus to till the earth once more, heads bowed, minds numb, hearts broken.

They were not fickle but they thought they had lost all hope.

They needed Easter morning. They needed the empty tomb. They needed, as we all do, the risen Jesus.

But before joy could burst into their minds, they must first pass through darkness and despair.

But sooner than they could have begun to imagine, joy would come. Light would overcome darkness. Jesus would rise.

And the pilgrim journey would begin again, the journey which we can and must all join. This is not just the journey to Jerusalem but the journey to the life which lies beyond this life.

As the virus darkens our world, life for us all today is confusing, difficult and fearful. But, just as Jesus' followers would learn, beyond fear there is peace, beyond despair there is hope, beyond death there is life.

So we too must make our pilgrimage on the path with Jesus, on the road to all that God has in store for us. Because Jesus trod the road to Jerusalem, we too can tread the road to eternal life.

John Harris, Palm Sunday, 2020