

Hadleigh, 8.00 a.m. Lent 6, 20/3/16

1. Today we find ourselves at the beginning of the most important week in the Christian Year. And it starts with a bang!: Palm Sunday. Here is the King entering his city and being received by the crowds. It is a great day and we can imagine the sun shining and lots of anticipation. This morning we'll look at what the playwrights call the 'Dramatis Personae' – the people who all had a part to play.
2. (i) First of all: **the crowds**. It must have been a wonderfully exciting time: Everybody shouting Hosanna and waving palm branches and putting clothes on the ground and the King coming into his kingdom. Opinion is divided as to whether it is the same people who are going to shout 'Crucify' on Friday? But however you look at it, the crowds on this day are doing what crowds always do, indulging in some mass hysteria. The same thing will happen at the end of the week only they will be shouting something different. Similar mass fervour can be seen today at sporting fixtures and demonstrations and as then, so now, we see people doing in a crowd what they might well not do as individuals. It's a phenomenon we are quite familiar with. That's not to say there wasn't a degree of sincerity – but the real question is: How deep did it go?
3. (ii) **The authorities**. They seem powerless: 'The world has gone after him', they say, but they are biding their time. They have their plans and on a dark night they will get their man. Officially they are not present and certainly don't join in celebrating the arrival of the King. But we can be sure that their spies are there and that they are fully aware of what is happening. One consequence is that they know that they dare not risk arresting Jesus openly. So they plan to do it on a dark night and with the assistance of Judas they will make sure they get the right man. Don't forget there were no photographs then and making sure who was who could be difficult on a dark night. But Judas solved that problem for them.
4. (iii) What did **the disciples** make of it? Did it seem as though their dreams were coming true? The Messiah was claiming his kingdom. Was Judas disappointed that he was so popular this day. What led him to be a traitor? There are all sorts of theories, but what about the others? Did they really think this was the beginning of something big? As we know when the end came, they were all to flee for safety and Peter was to deny him three times. We might well ask what sort of followers of Jesus they were. Yet we mustn't forget that it was these men who got the church going after the resurrection.

5. (iv) And lastly, what did **Jesus** make of it? Can we try to understand what was going through his mind? If that is not a little too presumptuous? Of course he knew what would happen. But on that day, everything felt right and he was conscious of fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah: 'Your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious . . . , humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of an ass' (Zech.9.9). But he was also aware that it was in Jerusalem that the prophets perished and of a couple to examples towards the end of what would have been for him and for all Jews the last book of their Bible, 2 Chronicles. So he knew that the Old Testament would be fulfilled in this way as well. Now, as the donkey carries him along in this triumphant procession, he looks back over his years since the Baptism by John the Baptist when his vocation was confirmed, and he had that intense spiritual experience, and then the toughening up in the 40 days in the wilderness. Victory then had prepared him for what was to come later. Perhaps he reflects on the teaching he had given during the last few years, teaching which still moves people today, whether Christian or not, and the healings which had demonstrated the power of God. Of course he knew this day was false dawn but it was a powerful demonstration of the reality of his kingship. Now he knows he must minister to the people in this last week, have a special Passover with his disciples and then it would be the hour of darkness when it would seem that his whole world was to be shattered. It was going to require everything he had, every last ounce of energy and will power.

6. So now we too, once again, approach this most holy week of the Christian year. As we have begun it with him, so we shall end it with him and we shall dare to look forward to Easter Sunday in a way those first disciples couldn't. But first, like him, we have to go through Good Friday. There is a sense in which we too, as Paul puts it, must be crucified with Christ. Let us walk with Jesus this week, of all weeks.