

Hosanna!

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sunday of the Lord's Passion Year A — 2 April 2023

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Isaiah 50.4-9a; Psalm 31.9-16; Philippians 2.5-11; Matthew 26.1-27.6

As some of you might recall, when I was preparing for ordination, I spent a term at the College of the Resurrection at Mirfield in West Yorkshire. The College is aligned with the Community of the Resurrection and therefore the students follow the life of the Community in praying the offices of the Church. After compline each evening we would enter into the greater silence and this would not be broken until morning prayer, the first words spoken each were considered to be of great significance. In our current prayer book, there are offices of Morning and Evening Prayer for each day of the week, and these are the ones generally chosen by many of us for our daily devotions. (Office, meaning duty from the Latin word *Officium*; it is the duty of the clergy to pray at the beginning and ending of each day). But the Prayer Book opens with orders of these offices which follow a more traditional pattern and in recent times I have taken to using these more often. They are the same every day unlike the more contemporary offerings and perhaps it is this rhythm that I find helpful. Anyway, these offices always begin the same way: "Open our lips O Lord, and we shall declare your praise", and then, "O God make speed to save us, O Lord make haste to help us."

Today we reenact the great event of Palm Sunday the beginning of the greatest week in the Christian calendar. It is for a good reason that we persist in processing around the church waving our branches; it is one of few public displays of our faith left. In my study hangs a picture taken in London in the 1930s of a procession through the streets. Leading a priest, with a deacon and sub-deacon are servers carrying banners, torch bearers and at least three thurifers, one of them is my grandfather. We don't do that sort of thing today—except on this day, when we process and sing *Ride on, ride on in majesty; hark, all the tribes hosanna cry!*

I think we often imagine that "Hosanna" means something like "Hooray!" or "Fantastic!" "Yippee!" as though it were a shout of rejoicing, but this is not really the case: For those folk in Jerusalem at that first palm procession "Hosanna" would have been a request, a petition, a prayer, and it means "Oh God, make speed to save us!"—the opening words, every morning and every evening in the offices of the Church. *Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.* The very first words spoken and heard each morning and evening remind us of our need of God. It is a reminder that we can very easily place our trust elsewhere—and we do.

Palm Sunday reminds us that despite the triumphant arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem, the cries and shouts of the people in celebration, very soon, within the week there would be cries for another. We know little of the life of Barabbas except beyond what we read in the gospels, but he features in all four which would tell us that, in the gospel tradition, his place is important. In some versions he is given the name Jesus Barabbas and in others he is described as the leader of an insurrection. The evangelists are telling us that a choice is being made; in whom do the people of Jerusalem place their trust? Jesus Christ the leader of a new movement, a universal movement, a realm in which peace and justice reign, or Jesus Barabbas, a man who is a sectarian leader, perhaps a nationalist zealot. The choice is stark, but, clearly, I think, the evangelists want to portray this scene as a choice between these competing ideologies. Passover was a time when the people came to Jerusalem to celebrate the overthrow of the Egyptian despot, the liberation of God's people. Jesus' agenda (Jesus Christ that is) was to take the spirituality of the Passover and break it open. His was a

universal project.

Those folk waving their palms saw Jesus as the new King David. Their hosannas were saying ‘God is for us, God will save us!’ The choice that is being made revolves around the answer to the question ‘who is us?’ This is a choice that has ramifications, and we don’t need to look very far to see those today in our world and in our own country. The supreme irony is that Jesus was crucified with the sign ‘King of the Jews’ hung above his head! For the Romans, Jesus was simply another sectarian, nationalist, zealot. For the Romans there was little choice to be made. For us it is among the most important choices we will ever make.

For us the call of this day is that we become skilled in being able to distinguish between the voice of Jesus Christ and the voice of Jesus Barabbas. *Morning by morning he wakens — wakens my ear to listen . . .* This is sometimes more difficult than we imagine such is the multitude of voices, the cacophony craving our attention and allegiance. Ours is a costly, but compelling, call: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Amen.