

PALM SUNDAY

Revd. Cara Heafey, Associate Minister, Summertown URC



Cowley Road Carnival, 2005. Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

READ: JOHN 12:12-16

"Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

REFLECT:

I'm writing this on Tuesday 23rd March 2021, the day that marks one full year since the first lockdown here began. The very first weekly reflection I sent out was for Palm Sunday, so this week's brings us full circle and means we have journeyed through a whole lectionary year together. Thank you for your company.

What a strange year we've had. I remember the silence and stillness of that first lockdown. I remember driving to work without seeing another car. I remember sleepless nights and empty supermarket shelves. Also: the unusually warm and sunny spring. Clapping, rainbows, and the ways communities rallied to keep everyone safe.

Back then I never imagined that a year later we would still be living under substantial restrictions, and that our church congregations would still be relying largely on post, telephone and the internet to stay in touch and worship together. I never imagined that in the UK more than 125,000 people would have lost their lives to the virus, and more than 2.7 million people worldwide. Fear, now, has ebbed to a low-level hum and been replaced by weariness. While hope is on the horizon, a vaccination programme well underway and a 'road map' out of lockdown plotted, it's a guarded hope, as the news of a rising third wave in Europe brings new (but familiar) dread.

The story of Jesus' carnival-esque entry to Jerusalem is told succinctly in John's gospel. We, the readers, know what lies ahead. For us the shadow of the cross falls ominously across the story. But the disciples accompanying Jesus never imagined that the fickle crowd would be shouting for Jesus' crucifixion a few chapters later.

Jesus seemed to know what he was walking into though. Mark's gospel gives more detail about the preparations for Jesus' arrival, about two of the disciples being sent ahead to collect a donkey colt, suggesting that the event was planned and choreographed by Jesus. It's been described by some commentators as 'street theatre'.

We might miss some of the symbolism and political connotation of what's happening. Passover was an anti-imperial festival, a celebration of freedom from Egypt. In the time of Roman occupation it would sometimes stir up tensions, even riots. Palm branches featured in the Maccabean revolt: when the temple was being cleansed after desecration by occupying forces, the Jews "entered it with praise and palm branches" -1 Macc. 13:51. To call Jesus "the King of Israel" was seditious talk.

Recent days and weeks have seen crowds gathering on city streets in the UK, and tensions building. Heavy-handed policing has only escalated violence, which in turn plays into the narrative of those calling for new laws that will strengthen police powers.

Jesus is no stranger to civil disobedience, but he refuses to be drawn into this vicious cycle. He may be lampooning the powers of empire but he also defies the expectations of the crowds, who want a revolution. He refuses to meet violence with violence. He has not come to seize power, but to demonstrate the power of love.

CONNECT:

Pause to reflect on the year that has passed, its losses and lessons. How has Christ been present?

RESOURCES:

Our friends at Wheatley URC have a huge archive of online sermons you can listen to, and are regularly posting new resources on their website:
www.wheatleyurc.org.uk

SUPPORT:

Pauline and myself, and your elders, are here for you if you need someone to talk to, have a prayer request, or just fancy a chat! Ping us an email or give us a ring.