

“HOSANNA PRAYERS”

Psalm 118:1-2; 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

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It's hard to know exactly what to make of this particular holy day. It's one of the most beloved days in our Christian calendar; everybody loves the palms and the hosannas. It must always have been significant, even to the earliest believers, because it's one of the few stories that all four gospel writers tell, albeit each a little differently.

It's interesting that we've named the day after the palm branches, since only John contributes that specific detail. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell about the people spreading the cloaks on the road. All but Luke tell us about the hosannas. The gospel writers aren't all in agreement about whether Jesus rode a colt or a donkey; Matthew doesn't choose but mentions both. In all four of the gospel accounts Jesus is described as a king in the tradition of Israel's great King David.

Luke relates Jesus' remark about the stones that would cry out, if the people didn't, and also tell us about Jesus weeping as he looks at the city of Jerusalem. Mark's story is somewhat anticlimactic: he concludes by noting that Jesus went to the temple and "looked around at everything" and then left because it was late. In Matthew's telling, Jesus goes directly to the temple to chase out the people who are making money from those who come to worship.

John writes that Jesus' disciples didn't understand what was happening.

I can appreciate that. How *do* we say what is going on in this story? What could we compare it to? Is it a holiday parade? A community festival? A dance party? A royal procession? A religious pilgrimage? A protest march? A red carpet celebrity welcome? A conqueror's entrance? Any of those comparisons might be suggested by the various little details provided by the four gospel writers, whose accounts are rich with imagery and symbolism. Each of them might contribute a little something to our understanding of Jesus.

Of course, like the gospel writers, we see this story through the lens of what we know about what came after – betrayal, cross, death... and resurrection. It's harder to know what might have been in the minds of the people there with cloaks and branches and hosannas. Because we know what we know, we wonder: How many of these folks were Jesus' followers already? Did some of them find themselves drawn to him after witnessing a healing or hearing him preach? Were they searching for someone or something to give them hope? Were some of them visitors to Jerusalem who got caught up in crowd enthusiasm? Were some just curious?

We wonder those things because we also wonder: were some of these same people in the crowds that turned against Jesus, just a few days later, stirred up by the men in power who conspired to end his life? Did some of them run away out of fear? Were some disappointed

that Jesus didn't turn out to be the new leader they'd been looking for? Did some witness Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion and think back to this day of palms and praises, wondering what went wrong? Did some of them, perhaps, think they'd do the same again, wave their branches harder, even, make their hosannas louder?

We don't know, and probably ought not to judge. After all, we're not always 100 per cent steadfast in our loyalty to Jesus, in the sincerity of our praise, in our desire to understand, in our willingness to sacrifice for his mission. And still - the ways we manage to be faithful DO matter - the worship we give, our growth, giving, acts of compassion. Our failures take nothing away from that. And no matter what happened after Jesus came into Jerusalem, we still see that crowd gathered to welcome Jesus; we still hear their voices; we still resonate with what they say; we still join them, with our palms and hosannas.

But we will understand them a little better if we listen more closely to what they say. We usually think of "hosanna" as a word of praise, sort of like "alleluia." It's become that, through centuries of Palm Sunday celebrations. But it's a word derived from Hebrew, and what it actually means is "save us." Think about that a bit, and you start seeing those crowds in a different light - not people of enthusiastic but shallow faith who desert Jesus when things get difficult, but people longing for healing, hope, change, freedom. People suffering injustice under the Roman occupation, people betrayed by their leaders, people with broken dreams and broken relationships. People who know their lives are filled with missed opportunities, wrong turns, unfulfilled responsibilities to their fellow human beings. People who know they need help... need God... need saving. And yet, at the same time, you can't miss the notes of joy, praise, and hopefulness in their chants of "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord."

It's probably safe to assume that some of these people were pilgrims who'd come to Jerusalem, site of the temple, center of Jewish worship, for Passover. We sometimes overlook this detail, but it's significant that Jesus makes this public entry into the city in the days just before Passover. That probably has something to do with the mood of the people, with their readiness to embrace a savior. And this is not incidental to the hostility that Jesus encounters in Jerusalem evokes from leaders who are deeply invested in the status quo, in keeping the peace, in not provoking the Romans, in retaining their own privileges. Because Passover was and is much more than a holiday centered around some special foods; Passover is about *liberation*. It's a time for remembering how God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt; it's also a time that looks forward with longing for liberation from all forms of oppression. It's exactly the kind of occasion that makes persons of power and privilege nervous, and the fact that Jesus to choose that particular time to make his entrance to the holy city surely hit a nerve. The sounds of people shouting "save us" in the streets can't have been welcome, either.

I want to point out one more tiny detail that Matthew contributes to this story. It's found its way into some of our Palm Sunday music, and into the worship traditions of a lot of churches including ours. Let me read to you a couple of verses that come just a little bit after what we already read. Jesus has gone into Jerusalem, to the temple. This is verses 14 and 15:

"The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did and heard the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry."

The children were crying out "Hosanna," "Save us."
And the powerful people were angry.

I've sometimes wondered if we are wrong to make this day a time for children to wave palm branches and process through the church with a funny-looking donkey. Are we making it too pretty, too cute? Are we making a complicated, conflicted day too simple, too easy? Are we in denial, trying to distract from the betrayal and suffering that belong to Holy Week?

But I'm seeing it differently this year. I'm hearing this story as suffering *and* hope, brokenness *and* joy, pleas for help *and* praises, all mixed up together. And where does that complicated, paradoxical mix of emotions resonate right now more than when we listen to our children?

"Save us" the children cry.

"We're afraid for our lives," they cry. Why does our country love guns more than it loves children? Save us!

We're traumatized by "security measures" and active shooter drills, but still know we aren't safe in our schools, or anywhere really.

We see the our planet being destroyed around us and fear that there will be nothing left for our future. Save us!

We are overwhelmed by expectations, peer pressure, media and social media.
We're struggling with anxiety, depression, thoughts of suicide. Save us!

Those we trust to protect us sometimes hurt us. People who say they want to protect us don't really care about who we are, about our families, about what we need. Save us! Save us!

Really the children are speaking for all of us, aren't they? Save us. Save us. Save us.

Still the powerful people don't want to hear. Sometimes even us less powerful people don't want to hear, because it's so painful. But we need to hear. Not *just* the crying, though.

There is also the palm waving, the praises, the laughter, the hope, the joy. The children who understand inclusion in ways more deeply than most of us ever will. The children and young people who are already leaders and advocates for the environment, for meaningful action on gun violence, for human rights. The children who are brave enough to be their creative, bold, different selves. The children who haven't, in spite of everything, become cynical or dispirited or narrow. We *really* need to hear them. And *join* them.

Because this crazy mixture of need and hope is what it is to live in our world. If we can't embrace both, we will have to live either in denial or despair. And neither denial nor despair is what we are called to. On Palm Sunday we join the crowds who brought both their need and their hope to Jesus. We are God's children who cry, "Hosanna, save us!" We know that Jesus understands how terrifying and sad and painful our world can be, because he experienced it too. And we know that he brought into our world a tender, fierce, unconquerable love, and the promise of new life. So as we follow Jesus into this Holy Week, we also say and sing, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord."

Amen.