

28th March 2021, Palm Sunday: 'What happens next?' (Isaiah 35, Matthew 21:1-17)

As a sports-mad 10-year old my favourite TV programme was 'A Question of Sport'. In those days it was David Coleman asking the questions, and Emyln Hughes and Bill Beaumont as team captains. Almost 40 years later, I'm still sports-mad and a Question of Sport is still on the telly, so not everything in life changes: in fact there are only three certainties in life – death, taxes, and a Question of Sport will still be on the telly. But I digress.

My favourite segment of the programme was round 5: What Happens Next. The idea was obvious: the teams were shown a clip which paused at the key moment, and they had to work out 'what happens next'. Usually something unusual or funny or embarrassing. You get the idea.

Now on A Question of Sport, what happens next is a bit of fun: but there are plenty of times in life when that question – What happens next? – is rather more important. When we go to the doctors and something is diagnosed, our first question is usually: what happens next? When I talk to parents looking to get their baby or child baptised, I'll remind them that it's what happens next, it's what happens *after* the baptism that determines whether this is a meaningful thing to do or not.

This weekend is very much a 'what happens next' weekend. As the first easing of rules comes into force on Monday suddenly people are starting to make plans, starting to think more than a few days ahead. What happens next is now a real question for us in a way that, frankly, it hasn't been for the first 3 months of the year.

And in the church's annual journey, this too is ultimately perhaps the one weekend of the year that could be subtitled 'What-happens-next weekend'. Palm Sunday is a momentous event in itself: Jesus arrives in Jerusalem as king, and most of us who've been active in faith for any period of time will know the story well – the donkey, the palm branches, the cries of Hosanna, the angry authorities looking on, the turning over of tables in the temple. **On Palm Sunday we learn finally, and conclusively, that Jesus really is the Messiah**, God's anointed rescuer, the new King descended from David. This is big stuff.

But, it's not where the story ends, is it? **What's on the lips of the crowd *then* as it's in the minds of all of us looking in on it *now* is the big question: what happens next?** Palm Sunday is the start of what we now call Holy Week. Jesus' public and unequivocal declaration of his identity sets events on a collision course with the authorities. And whilst we might know the end of the story now, every year we re-tell it, that it might come to us with fresh power. What happens next?

In the story, what happens next is strange. Jesus attacks the religious corruption of the temple authorities, thereby undermining the existing practices of his own culture, and then, even more bizarrely, leaves Jerusalem again. I've always been struck by the throwaway line in the text (which no-one ever really pays attention to) that Jesus doesn't actually stay in Jerusalem, but bunks down in Bethany throughout this week. It's quite clear that the one thing he's *not* trying to do is to whip up nationalist frenzy. After all, who arrives in the seat of power as the new ruler only to undermine that power and then leave before nightfall?

Palm Sunday is glittering, glorious – it grabs your attention with a host of compelling images: the crowds, the palms, the donkey, even the stones singing as Jesus puts it. It's all chaos and colour, it's community and conflict, it's a cacophony and a kaleidoscope, constantly shifting perspective and subverting our expectations. But underneath the spectacle, that little question still rings in our ears: what happens next?What will King Jesus do? How does this all play out?

This year, as every year, our task this week is to allow the story to unfold on its own terms. To come to us with fresh power. Perhaps to show us a detail we hadn't spotted before. Perhaps even to read the challenging chapters 23-25 in Matthew which Jesus speaks in Holy Week, while most of us jump from Matthew 22 straight to Matthew 26, to keep up with the pace of events. Ask yourself the question: what happens next? Let the story tell itself, unvarnished.

One final observation: for many of us, it's a long time since we've been in a crowd. Perhaps today for the first time, we read the story of the great crowds on Palm Sunday and it unsettles us, it feels like an alien world. Take a few moments to sit with that if you can. It's tempting for us this year to observe the story from the outside, to feel happier sitting with Jesus in Bethany rather than in the temple courts in Jerusalem. And that's OK. But for some of us, maybe we need to spend some time reflecting: what would it be like to be part of that crowd again?

And so we begin the journey of Holy Week and my prayer, for you as it is for me, is simply that **we too can cry with the crowds, not just today but throughout the week and beyond: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'** Amen.