

## A FLASHBULB MOMENT

Isaiah 50. 4-9a  
Philippians 2. 5-11  
Luke 19. 28-40

I speak to you in the name of ✠ the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

One could say that our Lord's entry into Jerusalem is like a flashbulb going off in a dark room. You know what that's like. You are sitting in the middle of a very dark room when suddenly, perhaps as a prank, someone pushes the test button on a camera's flash. Just before the flash, the room is so dim that you can hardly make out what is what. But in the instant of the flash, you can suddenly see everything with vivid clarity: the chairs, the curtains, the pile of magazines on the end table. For just a moment, you see it all. But then, as your eyes reel from this shock of illumination, everything fades and the room seems darker than it was before the flash.

Chapter 19 of St Luke's gospel is a bit like that. For one brief shining moment, we see the scene that has been familiar to us since our Sunday School days: the colt, the cheering crowds, the cloaks lining the road, and the mysterious man riding the colt into the sacred city. But like a flash in the dark, it doesn't last. As we will see in a moment, things were rather dark just before this entrance into Jerusalem, and well before the story finishes, they will grow darker still. And we need to notice these elements of darkness if we are to make proper sense of what we see in this flashbulb moment.

Today, we do well to consider this Palm Sunday story with fresh eyes. We start by noticing what St Luke does *not* include in his version. If Luke's gospel were the only one we had, we would not call this day Palm Sunday, because he never once mentions any waving of palms. Perhaps we would call it 'Cloak Sunday', because that is about the only detail Luke gives: the people spread their coats on the road for Jesus to ride

upon. And if Luke's gospel were the only one we had, we also would probably never have learnt the word 'hosanna', because Luke does not use that word either. He simply shows us Christ riding a colt, not even a stallion or a grown horse; and as our Lord enters Jerusalem, Luke tells us that he is acclaimed by a multitude of disciples, rather than the large crowds that are described in St Matthew's version of the story (21. 1-11).

If we were to take a moment to look at what surrounds our passage from St Luke, we might be surprised. Just before it, in verses 11-27, Jesus tells the parable of the ten pounds. This is the familiar story of the king who gives three servants varying amounts of money, telling them to get busy and do something with this resource while he is away. Upon returning, the king finds that the first two servants have done some wheeling and dealing and so have earned a nice return on the king's original investment. But the third servant is the one who gets most of the attention. Because he is the one who was so worried that he might make a bad business deal and so lose even the original sum, he just tucked it under his mattress until the king came back. Apparently the king would have preferred that the man had put the money in the bank, so that it earned interest; and the parable ends on a note of judgement against the timid servant.

And just after Luke's story of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we find him weeping over the sacred city (19. 41-44). Our Lord predicts that Jerusalem will be sacked one day soon, and that its inhabitants will be slaughtered. This gruesome series of events will happen because the people did not recognise God's Messiah when he came to them.

It seems an odd thing to say at that precise moment. After all, hadn't the people of Jerusalem just been singing, praising and shouting, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord'? The point that Jesus is making is that the people of Jerusalem

had actually missed the point: they were mistaken about what kind of king Christ was, and how he would accomplish his mission. Yes, our Lord was (and is) the King who comes in the name of the Lord; but his kingship had (and has) nothing to do with politics or power as this world knows them.

So we have a hint of dark judgement prior to Jesus's approach to Jerusalem, and then we have weeping and lamenting and still more dark words of judgement after he approaches the city. Now that we have seen the darkness and sensed something of what it means, we need to return to that fleeting glimpse of what we saw the moment the flashbulb went off. What is Palm Sunday really about? What does this famous and familiar scene mean for us as we begin our Holy Week journey towards Golgotha?

Too often we try to begin Holy Week with a bright note of waving palms, knowing that a week from today (on Easter Sunday) will also be fair and bright and awash in lilies. In that case, the darkness of this coming Friday seems like the exception, and not the rule, to what the whole thing is about. We find ourselves, as it were, surrounded by light and so must deal with just the one 'dark spot' in the week. But today I think we have seen that Luke reverses that: we are, as it were, surrounded by darkness with just the one bright spot. If we are going to truly follow Christ, we need to be content with a momentary flash that, if anything, only emphasises the seriousness of our Lord's mission.

Jesus is indeed the King who comes in the name of the Lord; and as we blink in reaction to the flashbulb's searing intensity, we might be surprised. We might find that we must also wipe tears from our eyes; for in that flashbulb moment, we glimpse our humble Saviour, the Lamb of God who goes to the cross to die for the sins of the world. He is, and always will be, our only hope in the darkness. Amen.