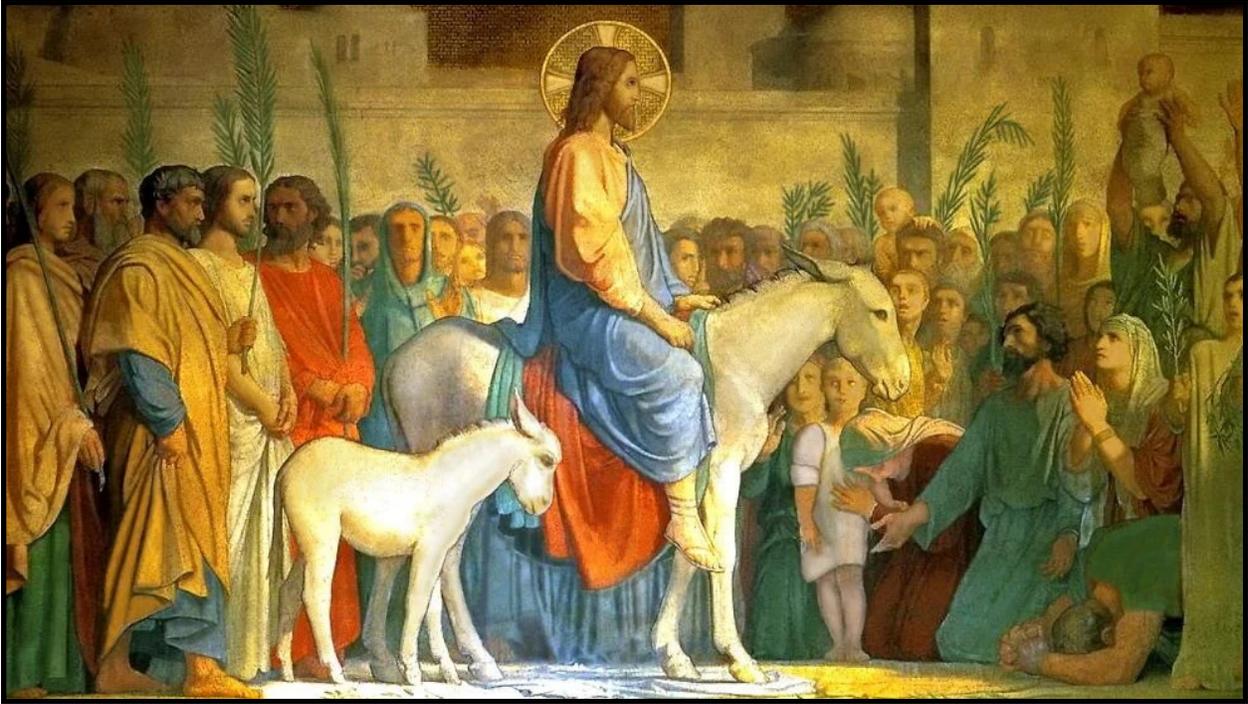


For the Journey

March 27/26 - Rev. Dave Crawford



(“The Entrance of Christ to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday”, Jean-Hippolyte Flandrin, 1860s)

“For the first four Sundays in Lent, following the assigned lectionary readings of the Bible, we found Jesus one on one: with the devil, with Nicodemus, with the Samaritan woman at the well, and with the man born blind. Last Sunday, the fifth in Lent, it was one on three: Jesus with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Almost all these scenes were intimate; the atmosphere was tense, the dialogues long, and with action sparse.

“Today is just the reverse. Palm Sunday is a crowd scene, with dense mobs of excited and enthusiastic folk. There’s a happy climate, a lack of restraint, an air of abandon reminiscent of God’s prodigality when God scatters flowers on the hillside and stars in the sky and spreads his mercy over sinners. Palm Sunday is a pageant, if you will.”

- **William Sloane Coffin, from a sermon given at Riverside Church, NYC, titled, “Palm Sunday: God’s Pageant”, April 12, 1987.**

I'm not sure we're cognizant of how large the crowds were as Jesus entered Jerusalem. Hollywood tends to provide downsized and demythologized portrayals of the day in question. David Batty's "The Gospel of John" and Canadian director Norman Jewison's "Jesus Christ Superstar", (music by Andrew Lloyd Webber), both imagine rather minuscule crowds attending the triumphal entry.

The ancient city in Jesus' time was roughly 220 acres with a permanent population of perhaps 25-30,000. At Passover the numbers swelled dramatically as pilgrims from across Israel and the Diaspora poured into Jerusalem in order to visit the Temple. Scholars estimate the numbers at between 250,000 to 300,000. The city would have been cramped, the streets. Many pilgrims brought their own tents, a significant number set up camp outside the city walls, wherever they could find a spot. Thus there would have been tens of thousands lining the streets when Jesus, fulfilling an ancient prophecy, rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Certainly not all were part of the Jesus movement, many would have been curious onlookers, many would not have even heard of Jesus from Nazareth. Still, contrary to our impressions, that first Palm Sunday crowd would have been huge. The new messiah and king of the Jews entered the holy city humbly, and yet the audience was not of humble size.

How quickly things changed. After the pageant concluded and the muddied cloaks and branches were gathered up for cleaning or disposal and the masses still crowding the streets turned their attentions elsewhere, the Jewish leaders conspired, the Roman occupiers schemed, and efforts to suppress Jesus gained momentum. With each passing day leading to the Last Supper and Good Friday the numbers of hopeful well-wishers dwindled, the tagalongs dispersed, and ultimately the inner circle fled. Only a few faithful women - Jesus' mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, Salome, and possibly another Mary - remained at Jesus side at the crucifixion.

As we approach Palm Sunday this weekend perhaps we're called to consider the extent and endurance of our own faithfulness to Jesus. We admire his teachings, we're impressed by his solidarity with the poor and oppressed, we commend his counter-cultural affirmation of children, women, and Samaritans, but do we tend to disperse, deny, or flee from the Jesus who is betrayed, beaten, and executed?

Palm Sunday is a pageant, as Coffin suggests, but one which leads to a procession, a death march labelled the via Dolorosa or "sorrowful way", Jesus, his cross, and a hushed entourage slowly trudging through those same, once burgeoning streets that celebrated Jesus' arrival as Messiah. Where do we see ourselves as all the events of Holy Week unfold, both two thousand years ago and today?

Grace and Peace, Rev. Crawford