

Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

Well we're not far from the end of Lent and this sermon is the last in the series on the theme of pilgrimage. Five weeks ago we began with the people of Israel and their pilgrimage to the Promised Land. Four weeks ago, it was a pilgrimage to Agen in Southern France, the place of St Faith's martyrdom. Three weeks ago we thought about pilgrimage to Canterbury – the spiritual centre of the Anglican Church. And last week we made pilgrimage to Rome and thought about how important not only Rome but Roman civilization and culture had been for the development of Christianity. Today, it's time to think about the pilgrimage of Jesus to Jerusalem. And there is no better day in the year to follow Christ's journey to Jerusalem, than Palm Sunday.

For Jesus it wasn't really a pilgrimage – his was a journey to trial, to crucifixion and ultimately, to resurrection. But there were lots of pilgrims in Jerusalem and they got it into their minds that Jesus was going to make a difference and their way of expressing that was to wave palms and to welcome him with the word 'hosanna' – which means 'save us'. For many, their hope was that he would save them from Roman oppression.

Palms became the symbol of the moment. Palms expressed the belief by some that Jesus was coming to save them, coming to make a difference - but all these years later, palms have become palm crosses as a reminder that before Jesus could save anyone, he first had to die.

A pilgrim, I think, is likely to be in a minority and it's one of the sadder reflections of democracy, that minorities are very often right. For the pilgrim it is a lonely journey. It took the people of Israel 40 years. It took St Faith about 13 years. It has taken the Anglican Church so far some 500 years, and the Roman Catholic Church around a 1000 years, to be left in no doubt that the pilgrimages we make are often likely to be extremely difficult and painful journeys. Individually, as Christians, our own pilgrimage began with our baptism and Jerusalem today is one of the annual stopping places in the Christian year. Palm Sunday is the moment in the year when we think of Jesus entering that city ready to die – which is what, in part, the Christian pilgrimage is about – being ready to die, and ready to die with hope.

Jerusalem was an important place for the early Christians because it was where Jesus ended his life. But after a very short while, the early church came to talk less about Jerusalem and more about 'the New Jerusalem' the place which which represented the heavenly city – the new kingdom, the place of eternal life.

Last Sunday evening here in Church we did something a bit different and a bit 'new'. Instead of choral evensong, Springs Contemporary Dance company performed just here in the middle of the Church. Their dance, which was called 'bread of life', was a piece that centered around the building of a table. For most of the dance there were two trestles on the dance floor and at various points in the dance the trestles were brought closer together. And just as it got to a point where it seemed that everyone was ready for the tabletop to be put into position, the table top that enabled people to sit and talk and eat and have fellowship with one another, so someone would come and move the trestles apart again. It was a stunning metaphor for the kingdom of God, perhaps even for the new Jerusalem in which God's people complete their pilgrimage when all things come together, when there is the unity of the family of God who come together to eat, to talk and to have fellowship – except for this irritating phenomena of someone who keeps coming back to move the trestles apart and to frustrate the plans and hopes of God.

In the end, the table was finished and the dance was complete (or perhaps ready to begin) after these very agile young people moved round it, under it and over it until finally all of the dancers came to be in a perfect stillness and silence, on top of the table – the dance was complete. The journey Jesus made into Jerusalem was something of a dance with people waving their palms. It was at first, a dance of adoration and welcome – until all of a sudden that dance changed. From being a moment of joy it turned to a moment of sorrow.

Lent has the potential for being a pretty miserable time. Some of us in the Vicarage are prone to groan at the never-ending repetition of Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is a massive mumble grumble of a psalm guaranteed to induce misery every time we say it and in Lent, it's supposed to be said every day at morning prayer. So by the end of Lent we get pretty sick of all that misery. Sick of it until we realized that one of the pieces sung last night by the Renaissance choir, Allegri's 'Miserere Mei', was nothing less than a version of psalm 51. And because it's in Latin we don't need to worry so much about the words; this is when the music takes over and takes us to heaven. It takes us to Jerusalem, but it doesn't stop. Instead it carries on getting higher and higher to a new Jerusalem. To the place where Jesus was pointing, not only on Palm Sunday, but throughout his life.

The early church talked about the new Jerusalem which was for them the kingdom of God revealed as a consequence not only of the death of Christ, but of the whole life and resurrection of Christ.

The image of the table is I think a good one if we can relate it to the idea of a new heaven and a new earth and of what it is that Jesus leads us towards. What Jesus wanted above all else was for people to sit down with each other – at a table. To eat bread and to drink wine. He wanted us to do that, to talk, to make peace, to offer and receive forgiveness, to bring reconciliation, to give company, to make small amounts of food go a long way, to sit down with people who are different, to welcome people at our table we might once have been offended by, to welcome people we once hated. That was the kind of new Jerusalem to which Jesus pointed - but the struggle is to stop one another from moving back the trestles.

It's no coincidence that what churches have at their centre is a table. But we have to know what the table is for. It's important to know what the table should be for because one of the things that Jesus once did in Jerusalem, in the old Jerusalem, was to kick the tables over. And the place where he did that was in the temple – in the very centre of where people focused their religion. What he offered was a new table, a place which stood for a new Jerusalem, a new heaven and a new earth.

So at the end of this pilgrimage of thoughts about different places in Lent, our palm leaves have been turned into palm crosses not just to remember that Jesus entered a city and got himself killed. But that Jesus entered a city and, having heard the cry of people to save them, he did just that. He began a new way to a new heaven and a new earth.

Today we gather around this table. Underneath all that material, it's solid oak and the legs are very well screwed on. As a reminder of what Christ did for us we come to it to eat and to drink and be blessed from it – and then to go and do and be all of the things that God wants for us.

It's not so much the end of a pilgrimage but the start of a new beginning.