

Palm Sunday 2017

We began this service by singing hosanna to the king of kings. Hosanna to us is a shout of joy, celebration and welcome of our Lord and king. It seems it was to those first century Jews who were welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem:

Hosanna to the son of David!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Palm Sunday is our annual festival-like way of remembering and reliving that day, of entering into it for ourselves as we welcome Jesus our Lord and king and prepare to journey with him through this holy week.

But we also use that same anthem week by week at the heart of our Communion service as we welcome him into our hearts, into our hands, into our lips as we celebrate his presence amongst us in bread and wine.

And yet that anthem wasn't new to those first century Jews; it had already been used in their worship for over 600 years and up to a thousand years.

There it is in psalm 118, a psalm that we know from the Mishnah was used at one of the great pilgrim festivals of the Jews, the Feast of Tabernacles – hence the line about joyful shouts coming from the tents of the righteous. Now through our series on the psalms we have noticed – or at least I have – how different parts of the psalms are clearly sung or spoken by different people. At one moment the psalmist cries to the Lord in lament or petition or trust:

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills : from whence cometh my help.

2 My help cometh even from the Lord : who hath made heaven and earth.

but then there seem to be words addressed from God – perhaps through a temple priest or prophet – to the petitioner:

7 The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil : yea, it is even he that shall keep thy soul.

8 The Lord shall preserve thy going out, and thy coming in : from this time forth for evermore.

We sometimes think of the psalms as the hymn book of the Old Testament but I don't think that's quite right. They are more like half way between a hymn book and a book of liturgy such as the Book of Common Prayer or Common Worship – except, as someone once said, all the rubrics are missing, the lines in italic that tell you what's supposed to be happening, who is processing where

and why and who is saying or singing what. Our dramatisation of the psalm this morning was an attempt to guess what the rubrics were and to follow them.

Whilst it is likely that this psalm became part of the liturgy of the Feast of Tabernacles, its origins may have been a particular historical circumstance in the life of Israel and its king. The principle performer in this liturgy is the king and he is returning to his capital city having triumphed in battle. It hadn't looked good – he had seemed defeated:

*The stone which the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.*

*All the nations encompassed me,
but by the name of the Lord I drove them back.*

*They hemmed me in, they hemmed me in
on every side,
but by the name of the Lord I drove them back.*

*They swarmed about me like bees;
they blazed like fire among thorns,
but by the name of the Lord I drove them back.*

The king leads a triumphal procession up to the Temple gates:

*Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter and give thanks to the Lord.*

The priests or Levites who were the gatekeepers give their welcome:

*This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.*

And the procession moves towards the altar. I gave the next words to the king but I've changed my mind. I think they are a cry of the crowd. 'Come, O Lord, and save us we pray.' The 'save us we pray' in the original Hebrew is 'Hoshi ah na', which became our 'Hosanna'. For hundreds of years before Jesus this psalm was used at the Feast of Tabernacles and it was played out as a messianic psalm – that is, originally it was used by a king who won a battle, perhaps it was used by his successors as an annual liturgical reliving of that victory and other victories – their Palm Sunday, if you like. But for hundreds of years there were no kings and the part had to be played for one who stood in for the coming king, the expected messiah, so 'Come, O Lord, and save us' may have been a prayer for the messiah to come, for this liturgical enactment that started as a historical event to

become history again with the sending of a new king whom they could receive with the words, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'

The Mishnah tells us that their festal procession went up to the horns of the altar; they went round the altar carrying with them the lulab, which (my commentary says) is a bundle of branches made up from myrtles, willows and palms. They laid their bundles at the altar. That is probably there in the verse which is unfortunately mistranslated – it is a notoriously difficult verse to translate, but the word is not cords but entwined branches.

We may have lost the rubrics but Jesus and his contemporaries knew them. The events of Palm Sunday are a carefully choreographed claim to being the messiah, the Christ, the coming king. This is a procession right to the gates of the temple – which is right where Jesus is heading. The very next verse after our first gospel reading says

Then Jesus entered the temple...

But he then changes the script completely by driving out all those who were buying and selling and overturning the tables of the money-changers.

It's the same story always, Jesus fulfilling the dreams, aspirations and prophecies of the OT but at the same time subverting them. He is a king who comes to the temple to claim his kingdom, but the victory he is to win is of a different sort to what they've known before:

Mightier foes than ever: the Devil, death, hell, judgment.

More powerful weapons: silence, the other cheek, forgiveness, compassion, the words of a psalm.

But greater effect: a kingdom established, a new community of faith and hope and love launched, a message that reaches the ends of the earth, a coming king whom we still hail with palms today.

So let us walk with him to Jerusalem, let us break bread with him and allow him to wash our feet, let us watch with him in the garden, and let us be there as we remember his trail, his passion and his dying for our sins and the sins of the world. This is our holy week – let us enter into it with him.