

Reading for the Day – Matthew 21:1-11

21 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.^[a]

⁴ This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

*⁵ ‘Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’*

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd^[b] spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

‘Hosanna to the Son of David!

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’*

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ ¹¹ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

Reflection on Matthew

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It was 26th June 1996 – the Euro Championships semi final between England and Germany where all the crowd waited with bated breath as Gareth Southgate stepped up to take a penalty... and missed... and with that England’s dreams of winning their first international competition since 1966. I remember where I was, being a lifelong football fan. That year and that night I was compering a school Revue show at a Performing Arts Centre but we had a black and white TV backstage and a running commentary through the evening to the audience on how the match was going. I was actually backstage when the infamous penalty was taken and remember it well. I was part of the Euro 96 crowd. You probably have memories of being part of significant crowds in your time. Whether sporting crowds – Rugby, Cricket, Tennis – nail biting large competitions, victories and losses, or other crowds such as celebrating a Royal wedding, Princess Diana’s funeral, being part of

the London Marathon, a New Year's Eve crowd. There are lots of memorable times when people gather together as a celebratory crowd. In our current days, of course, that can't happen. Nevertheless thousands, millions of us are coming out at 8pm on Thursday evenings as a 'crowd' to applaud and thank our wonderful NHS. It is truly inspiring to see these crowds all turning out for one very vital reason.

Today is Palm Sunday and we remember another huge crowd of people, and celebration. When Jesus took a donkey and rode into Jerusalem. And the crowds came out to see him, cut branches, spreading them on the road and waving them, shouting 'Hosanna to the Son of David'. It was an event that happened then which is replicated in some form today all through our Christian churches. 'Hosanna' can mean either a plea: 'Save us' or it can mean thanks; 'Thank you for saving us' The people were shouting both to Jesus – save us and thank you for saving us. On the last two Thursdays perhaps our 'crowds' have been saying the same – maybe we don't fully understand the dynamic of what is going as we have stood outside our houses and applauded but we are saying 'Save us' and 'Thank you for Saving us' and not just to the NHS. Every one of us is saying it like the crowd in Jesus' time said it to him, we are saying it to whoever it is out there that – save us and thank you for saving us.

I wonder what Jesus saw and felt when he looked out into the crowd that were waving branches and shouting praise? There would have been many layers of different people there lining the streets for him. From his closest friends, the disciples plus Martha, Mary and others, also the deaf, blind and sick he had healed, also those who were willing and inspired by him to give – people who were taking the shirts off their backs to throw on the ground for him and these people would willingly do that for others too. There would also be people who are there to see this man they had heard so much about – come and see this prophet, King, healer, it is really exciting! And then the sceptics, the dubious and the unsure, plus Jesus' enemies, those who would bring him down. The crowd was a whole mix of people all shouting, cheering and waving 'Save us!' and 'thank you for saving us!'

I have often wondered why it is that Jesus *allows* himself to be so public at this point and yet not bring any teaching. On other occasions with large crowds there has been a focus on him teaching the people. We don't have this here. Jesus says nothing and doesn't try to teach. I have come to the conclusion that it has more to do with Jesus wanting to connect with the crowd on a relational level than anything else. If we think about the crowd being a number of rings around Jesus from an extreme out circle to the closest circle around him, then we can start to think about how Jesus is connecting with the crowd at this time. There is the outermost ring – let's say 10,000 people who have heard of Jesus and are 'watching and listening' to see what it might mean for them at some point – but they are a long way away. Then there is the next ring – say 5,000 people – whom Jesus has touched and helped, those who follow Jesus to places where he feeds and

heals – the woman who touched his cloak, the blind men who were healed, the 5,000 who were fed – this is the crowd that Jesus touched and helped. After that there is the 70 or 72 that Jesus talks about earlier in the gospel. These are the people who are even closer to Jesus, who share in his mission and ministry – who follow Jesus to work and serve for him. The next circle is even closer still – the 12 disciples, brothers who give up everything to hang out with and follow Jesus. Closer still to Jesus are the 3 – Peter, James and John – who experience the most with Jesus and follow him to glory and suffering. Then finally, in scripture, there is the one disciple who is closest of all to Jesus, he sat next to him at The Last Supper, he was at the Cross when everyone else left, and he was given a new mother by Jesus, and a revelation to inspire. His name was John, the disciple whom Jesus loved.

Every one of the people in these crowds is important to Jesus – from the outermost circle of people to those closest to him in all the world. Each person wherever they stand before Jesus is important. But in each circle there is the same invitation ‘Come, come closer’ It is an invitation to everybody. Don’t let yourselves be held back by doubt, fear, suspicion, reputation, materialism – come closer to Jesus because it will be amazing!

The great invitation from God is to draw near to Him – come closer to Him – Yes, the one who sits on the throne in Heaven wants you to come closer to Him. The followers of Jesus should want to be in only one place and that is closer to Jesus each day. Jesus’ passionate cry was “Come” to everyone in the crowd that day and for us today.

“Come, follow me ...and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19)

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31).

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37).

Come and be saved by him.