

Singing to the Lord in Exile: Biblical Reflections with Music

Reflection II: A Pilgrim Song

Palm Sunday is not always a calm liturgical celebration. From experience, the distribution of palms to children does not always lead to an symbolic realisation of the Kingdom of Peace- as a child, I often decided that my palm was best employed as a sword with which to poke my sister- and the long period of standing during the reading of the Passion can sometimes lead us to feel fatigue or frustration rather than devotion.

But although celebrating Palm Sunday in church brings its own challenges, many of us may have missed the messy business of processing to the church and witnessing Christ's passion as part of the "crowd". As we heard in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 21:1-11), the crowd which welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem was far from quiet or passive as it proclaimed Jesus to be the Son of David: the new, anointed King of Israel- the "Messiah"- who Jews of the time were expecting to replace the tyranny of Roman and collaborationist government.

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 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!"**

Jesus' procession into Jerusalem presented a real challenge to the hegemony of Roman Imperial rule. Although Jesus did not come to launch a violent revolution (see Matthew 26:51; John 18:10), in His later conversation with Pilate he relativises the pretensions of human authorities to absolute power. As Christ explains, Pilate only enjoys authority over Him because that authority has been granted to Pilate by God (see John 19:11). This is good news for us even today: it means that although God works through created rulers and events their power is not absolute, and the success of His plan for our salvation is not in doubt. So too, not even the suffering caused by pandemic illness can prevent us from knowing God; it too mysteriously lies in His Providence. As St Paul famously remarks:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

As Biblical scholars have noted, Jesus' arrival on Palm Sunday would have occurred at about the same time as the procession with which Pilate, the governor, would have entered the city from Passover from the opposite direction.¹ But these two processions would have been very different. Pilate might have ridden into Jerusalem on a horse, accompanied by soldiers in a display of military might. By contrast, Jesus here consciously chooses to ride a humble donkey, to fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9-10 (see Matthew 21:5), which promises the arrival of a new king in Jerusalem: a ruler who will bring universal peace in the place of royal military equipment. As we will see with stark vividness on Good Friday, Jesus' Kingship is one of complete service and love, even in the face of violent rejection.

Although sermons and hymns often state that the crowd which welcomed Jesus into the city was the same crowd which demanded his death a few days later, as Pope Benedict XVI has argued, this was probably not the case.² The people who acclaim Jesus as King were probably pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem for Passover, accompanying Jesus from Galilee and the surrounding countryside. Although the cry "Blessed is he who comes..." clearly evokes the Messianic expectations surrounding Jesus, it was

¹ See M. Bord and J.D. Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem* (HarperOne, 2009), 2.

² Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two: Holy Week, from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (CTS, 2011), 8.

originally part of a liturgical response given by priests in the Temple to arriving pilgrims (Psalm 118:26). By contrast with this crowd of rural travellers, the reaction to Jesus' arrival of those living in Jerusalem- who perhaps fear losing something from a challenge to existing power-structures- recalls the fear and uncertainty which Herod felt at Jesus birth (Matthew 2:3):

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

The crowd's action is not, therefore, a matter of individual piety: rather, their actions are *communal* or even *political*. Whilst the arrival of God's Kingdom of Peace isn't a project which will finally be realised by any human government or political action, it will involve our collective agency and co-operation. In this respect, it is perhaps important to remember what the Biblical term "Peace" really means. As Terence Cuneo follows Nicholas Wolterstorff in arguing, peace in the Bible is not merely an individual inner tranquillity or merely an absence of conflict, but rather the state in which God's people delight in treating one another justly.³ Thus Psalm 72, which asks God to make Israel's king a righteous judge for the poor, links the "righteousness" of his kingdom with "peace".

But doesn't the importance of community for God's Kingdom render our inability to realise this "peace" by celebrating Palm Sunday and Easter together all the more difficult and frustrating? Perhaps this is another occasion on which listening to liturgical music can draw us into the story which the Gospel is telling and reveal something of the Bible's relevance for our own lives. Whilst reading the passage from Matthew's gospel above, it may help to listen to the motet "Hosanna to the Son of David" composed by the early 17th century composer Orlando Gibbons, which knits together the cries of the pilgrims as recorded with slight differences in the Synoptic gospels (see Matthew 21; Mark 11; Luke 19):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xy3NCeoe3OA>

**Hosanna to the Son of David:
blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.
Blessed be the King of Israel;
blessed be the Kingdom that cometh in the name of the Lord:
peace in heaven, and glory in the highest places;
Hosanna in the highest heavens.**

When listening to "Hosanna to the Son of David", it is easy to imagine being in the middle of the crowd proclaiming Jesus King. The clear, joyful entries of the different voices sound like the shouts of individual people or groups, and retain their own musical integrity. But since this is a piece of polyphony, in which multiple melodic lines are woven into a single piece, the individual voice-parts beautifully re-echo one another, combining to form a majestic harmony of praise. At the end of the piece, the unity of the parts becomes most evident as the musical lines come together in tempo: it is as though the praise of the pilgrim Church is gathered, through Christ.

As my colleague Deacon Henry explains in his "Stay Safe" Homily (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRDgZB0E0tw>), being part of a crowd can sometimes lead to a stifling or unquestioning unity in which individual thought is suppressed. This unanimity can bear disastrous consequences, as witnessed in the complete agreement of the crowd before Pilate to demand Jesus' death, which Pilate felt powerless to resist.

But Gibbons' motet can bring us the good news that participation in some common actions- in this case, religious celebration- need not always follow this negative pattern. Rather, our shared worship and life as God's People allows us to joyfully realise our vocation as individuals who have distinctive and coherent stories. In other words, worshipping God together- particularly at Mass, when we are united to Christ sacramentally- allows us to enter His Kingdom of Peace. And if this is true of our present worship of God on earth, we can expect that this joyful unity-in-difference will be all the more fully realised in

³ Terence Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy* (OUP, 2016), 133-4.

Heaven. Our own pilgrim songs will there be joined to the triumphant song of the angels with which Handel's *Messiah* famously ends: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3x2fSxOej4>

**“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain...
to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength,
and honour, and glory, and blessing!”** (Revelation 5:12)

Although we weren't able to physically unite in common witness to Jesus' Kingship on Palm Sunday this year, we can take encouragement from the knowledge that God promises us the opportunity to worship Him more perfectly in the future, provided we preserve His gifts of faith and love. Like those present on the first Palm Sunday, as pilgrims we still have a journey ahead of us; yet we too have Christ to accompany and lead us, even when we feel distant from others.

Experiencing the foretaste of heavenly worship on Palm Sunday might raise another question for us, though. We might wonder why Jesus' story didn't end following Palm Sunday. Couldn't God have transformed the song of the pilgrims into the song of the angels directly? In other words, granting that God's Kingdom is a Kingdom of Peace, we might wonder why there was any need for Christ's suffering and death. From our own present perspective, we might wonder why we too are forced into painful separation from the Church during this period of quarantine and self-isolation.

Does Easter require Good Friday?

The answer to this question, I think, may become clearer as we accompany Jesus to Calvary through Holy Week. In witnessing the liturgical re-enactment of His trial and passion liturgically and by reading its description in the Bible (perhaps as set to music), we might learn something of the value of Christ's crucifixion.

In the meantime, we can note that it is important not to make one mistake common to both the crowds which we read of on Palm Sunday. Both the crowd welcoming Jesus and the crowd before Pilate think that they know who Jesus is. He fits into their preconceived categories of “Messiah”, “false prophet” or “agitator”. In Luke's account, the disciples who bring him the donkey even “set him on it” (Luke 19:35; see 1 Kings 1:33): they want to make Jesus the sort of king which they are expecting- a king like Solomon to restore Israel's political status.

Yet as the theologian Hans-Urs von Balthasar argued, one way in which God's revelation is like music is that it has the capacity to surprise us. No one listening to a Symphony can quite know how it will end or progress until they have heard the final chord.⁴ Likewise, during this unusual Holy Week we should allow God to surprise us in the new ways in which He reveals Himself.

⁴ See Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (Ignatius, 2004), 52-3.