**Palm Sunday 13th April 2014**

Being part of a big crowd is quite an experience. Yesterday I was at a football match, cheering on my team, Burnley, hopefully to promotion to the Premier League. Football, like other spectator sports, thrives off the thrill of being one among thousands all absorbed in the contest and reacting to the roller coaster of emotions you may experience through the game. Going to a big concert is an experience. Being part of worship in the presence of thousands, say at Greenbelt or Spring Harvest, is usually an uplifting experience.

But crowds can be fickle. They can be easily manipulated.

There is lots of research into the psychology of the crowd as a group and the psychology of those who allow their will and emotions to be informed by the crowd. One new insight is that it takes approximately 6% of a crowd to change the entire direction the crowd is travelling in. This has also found to be true in non-human crowds, such as flocks of birds and schools of fish.

“Everyone else is doing it.”

Do you remember those words? Do you remember begging your Mom or Dad for permission to do something they would ordinarily not permit by insisting, “But Mum, everyone else is getting to do it!”

The typical parental response to such childish logic usually went something along the lines of, “Well, if everyone else jumped off a bridge would you do it too?” (Of course now that grown men and women actually PAY to go bungee jumping off of bridges, that argument might not have as much clout as it used to!)

*Still, Mom and Dad’s point holds water: Just because everyone else seems to being doing something, or just because everyone else seems to be saying something, doesn’t mean it is the right thing to do, or say. In fact, it very often means that a lot of those people have no idea why they are acting as they are acting, or saying what they are saying.*

Too often “everyone else is doing it” is a “mob mentality,” a “crowd consciousness,” that spurs on our worst actions.

Authorities have always been a little scared of the power of the mob. But it is also true that authorities have also harnessed the power of the mob – from revolutions to crucifixions.

At the start of Holy week a crowd welcomes Jesus enthusiastically into Jerusalem. At the end of the week a crowd shouts crucify and gets Jesus put on a cross and a revolutionary, Jesus Barrabas, set free.

We all can have a tendency of going with the crowd. The Christian faith says that the whole mass of humanity is tarnished by sin and guilt. We are all in it together. All we like sheep – have gone astray. But through Christ there is a Saviour. One who carries our guilt, one who reaches out to us while we are lost, one who by his wounds we are mysteriously healed and reconciled.

The week starts with Jesus, entering Jerusalem humbly riding on a donkey.

When my son and I go to football matches we try and guess who owns which cars. The players’ car park, you see, is filled with huge and gleaming Bentley’s, Merc’s, Landrover’s, Audi’s, Beemer’s, and we try to put a player behind the wheel – probably failing hopelessly. It’s a statement about their wealth and importance.

If Jesus is the Son of God then you have to fall silent in awe and wonder at the God who stooped so lowly and tenderly to touch our lives, with real compassion and care. This is the Servant King who rides on a donkey and who will wash his disciple’s feet.

Matthew curiously gives us a lot of details about the procurement of Jesus’ donkey. Anyone familiar with the book of Zechariah would immediately recognize why. Zechariah 9:9 says,

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, ***humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey***. He will ***cut off the chariot***from Ephraim ***and the war horse*** from Jerusalem; and the ***battle bow shall be cut off***, and he shall ***command peace*** to the nations.

In Matthew 21:6-7 if you read closely, you’ll notice that it says, “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*.” In other words, **Matthew’s version sounds like Jesus rode in of both beasts at the same time, straddling two animals like some circus act.**

**John Dominic Crossan[[1]](#endnote-1)** writes that Matthew wants two animals, a donkey with her little colt beside her, and that Jesus rides “them” in the sense of having them both because of their highly visible symbolism. In other words, Jesus does not ride a stallion or a mare, a mule or a male donkey, and not even a female donkey. He rides the most unmilitary mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her.

Historically, triumphal entries into Jerusalem would have been exactly the opposite of what Mark, Matthew, and Zechariah described. The triumphant military leader would have come *riding* a chariot and war horse and *wielding* a bow or other weapons. Jesus was about non violent peace. He came in humility to love and serve.

*Corrie Ten Boom was a famous Christian whose testimony of suffering in Nazi concentration camps and God’s grace through it all touched millions of lives. A few years ago, in a press conference following a ceremony in which Corrie Ten Boom was given an honorary degree, one of the reporters asked her if it was difficult remaining humble while hearing so much acclaim. She replied immediately, “Young man, when Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches and throwing garments in the road and singing praises, do you think that for one moment it ever entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him?” She continued, “If I can be the donkey on which Jesus Christ rides in his glory, I give him all the praise and all the honour.”*

Donkeys are not threatening or majestic creatures but humble and ordinary. The church is to be equally humble and ordinary as we carry the life of Christ. Sometimes the church can act more like a majestic stallion or war horse than a donkey. We always need to keep our feet on the ground as ordinary and human rather than pious and morally superior. Like the donkey, can we faithfully carry the love of Christ into the world.

The disciples take off their cloaks and lay them on the back of the donkey for Jesus to sit on. Then the crowd take off their cloaks and carpet the road with them. What is going on there?

Cloaks were very important items at the time of Jesus. A cloak offered warmth and protection. It provided modesty, shielding nakedness. A cloak doubled as clothing and shelter, functioning as haberdashery by day and as a bedroll by night.

If you were in debt your creditor could demand everything from you except the cloak from your back. According to ancient Jewish law, there were moral limits on what could be demanded in payment for debts. Among those things that were legally “off-limits” was a person’s most important piece of clothing, their “cloak.” Less substantial garments could be held as collateral. But a person’s cloak was considered to be in a category by itself.

You could take a lot in payment for debts, but you could not take the cloak off someone’s back. Debt of course is a real issue in our society and many get trapped in it and may feel that even the cloak off their back is being demanded.

But a cloak could always be OFFERED. Sir Walter Raleigh legendarily swept his cloak off his shoulders and flung it over a mud puddle so his Queen’s foot would not be dampened.

As Jesus enters Jerusalem the crowd symbolically offer their cloaks to him. They are willing to be in his debt. They are willing to give everything for him.

But crowds are fickle.  Watch the supporters of any professional sports franchise and you will see. When the team is winning the stadiums are full, when the team hits a losing streak, the gate monies diminish.

Be they political supporters, pop idol followers, or sports fans; crowds are at their best when they are cheering on a winner. At their worst when they are disgruntled.

*Some years ago a book was written by Gene Smith, a noted American historian. The title was "When The Cheering Stopped." It was the story of President Woodrow Wilson and the events leading up to and following WWI. When that war was over Wilson was an international hero. There was a great spirit of optimism abroad, and people actually believed that the last war had been fought and the world had been made safe for democracy.*

*On his first visit to Paris after the war Wilson was greeted by cheering mobs. He was actually more popular than their own heroes. The same thing was true in England and Italy. In a Vienna hospital a Red Cross worker had to tell the children that there would be no Christmas presents because of the war and the hard times. The children didn’t believe her. They said that President Wilson was coming and they knew that everything would be all right.*

*The cheering lasted about a year. Then it gradually began to stop. It turned out that the political leaders in Europe were more concerned with their own agendas than they were a lasting peace. At home, Woodrow Wilson ran into opposition in the United States Senate and his League of Nations was not ratified. Under the strain of it all the President’s health began to break. In the next election his party was defeated. So it was that Woodrow Wilson, a man who barely a year or two earlier had been heralded as the new world Messiah, came to the end of his days a broken and defeated man.*

*It’s a sad story, but one that is not altogether unfamiliar. The ultimate reward for someone who tries to translate ideals into reality is apt to be frustration and defeat. There are some exceptions, of course, but not too many.*

It happened that way to Jesus. What could Jesus possibly have done in one week that so disillusioned his supporters that they turned on him, called for a criminal in his place, and were happy to see him killed?

Perhaps the key to understanding this falling away lies in what Jesus does next when he gets inside Jerusalem.  He goes and overthrows the tables of the money lenders in the temple.

Almost the whole economy of the temple was based upon the temple and its sacrificial system.  The buying and selling of sacrificial animals, and the interest generated by changing money into the exclusive temple currency.  The religious industry was what made Jerusalem work economically. This economy was corrupt and Jesus took them on.

The arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem turned out to be, not the arrival of a club member who would endorse the status quo but rather the arrival of a table turning radical, who had justice at his core. Once that realization dawned, assassination and not worship was on the agenda.

True godly love is not sentimental. It gets angry at injustice and burns with passion for the world to be as God would have it. The Passion of Jesus is not only about suffering; it is about the strength of a deep calling. Jesus was a person who was following his bliss. He was god-intoxicated, so in love with God and with his call to serve and to love God. He could not have gone another direction other than where he was headed. It doesn’t go down well.

Finally Jesus shows us the way of forgiveness – the heart of God towards us even when we abandon God or deny Jesus as Son of God. Judas and the other disciples would betray and deny Jesus in this week. Like Adam and Eve, like Israel and David, like the other disciples and like all human beings everywhere, when the chips are down, we choose another way. The disciples are weak, and Jesus is abandoned.

Jesus knew about the betrayal and desertion to come. Barbara Brown Taylor[[2]](#endnote-2) wrote: "When Jesus holds up the cup at the last supper and offers what is in it as the fluid of forgiveness, he is not talking to people with a short list of minor sins. He is talking to people who will turn him in, who will scatter to the four winds at the first sign of trouble, and who will swear they never knew him. He is talking to people who should have been his best friends on earth, who will turn out not to have a loyal bone in their bodies, and he is forgiving them ahead of time" (*Gospel Medicine*).  
  
Jesus is brought before Pilate the Roman Governor. It was part of the strange coincidence of the moment that there should be in prison in Jerusalem, a notorious rebel leader who bore the name Jesus: Jesus Barabbas. It was a popular name at the time. Pilate asks the crowd to choose, for their festival celebration, which one of the Jesus’s he should release.

Matthew wants to make a point and he presses it home. Barabbas represents all of us. When Jesus dies, the rebel goes free, the sinners go free, we all go free. That, after all, is what the Passion story is all about.

The subtlety is lost on Pilate. The only subtle point he wanted to make in this was that he wasn’t guilty. It wasn’t his fault. When Pilate washes his hands, Matthew doesn’t think for a moment that he is any less guilty. The point for Matthew is that all are guilty: the chief priests, the elders who have handed Jesus over; Pilate the weak bully; and the crowds. And part of the reason for stressing universal guilt is that, with the death of Jesus, redemption is offered to all.

What happened, close up and in sharp focus, to Barabbas is now open to all. When Jesus dies as King of the Jews, he draws on to himself the guilt and death of Israel and also of the world.

All the time there are voices whispering ‘he’s innocent’. Pilate’s wife sends him a message saying so. Throughout this story it is the women who speak or act truly: the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus, the servant girls who challenge Peter’s concealment, the women at the cross and beside the tomb.

But Jesus innocence is the key to Matthew’s meaning. Had he been another rabble rouser, another Barabbas, what would be gained by swapping one such for another? Jesus dies in the place of the sinner, his great Passover action makes a way through the Red Sea of sin and guilt and death, inviting Barabbas, and an increasing multitude ever since, to walk to freedom, to know that their guilt and sin and even their death is not going to be the last word.

The default position of Jesus is forgiveness. In the death of Jesus, the depth of God's love for us is shown. The earliest Christians understood that in laying down his own life Jesus denied "the temple's claim to have a monopoly on forgiveness and access to God. The curtain in the temple was torn in two. ...God in Jesus has already provided the sacrifice and has thus taken care of whatever you think separates you from God. This is a sign of radical grace. Because of Jesus you can find your way back to God.

Everything was changed by this death, and God's love is revealed in it: No matter the betrayals, the abandonment, the taunts, the mocking, the anger, the suffering the violence. God continues to love you. Radical grace. It changes the world.

This week, [Ireland](http://www.theguardian.com/world/ireland)'s president, Michael D Higgins, met the Queen on the first ever state visit to the UK by the country's head of state three years after the Queen's visit to Dublin heralded the start of a new chapter in the relationship between the two countries.

[Martin McGuinness](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/martin-mcguinness), Northern Ireland's deputy first minister, attended a banquet hosted by the Queen – a move unthinkable just 10 years ago.

Simon Jenkins wrote in the Guardian[[3]](#endnote-3): '[*Queen shakes hands with IRA*](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/jun/22/martin-mcguinness-shake-hands-queen)*' would once have caused a sensation. For a monarch to cross a divide is not to unite it, but it is better than not crossing at all.*

*The history of attempts to end communal violence in Northern Ireland since the 1960s is sobering for all who claim for Britain some unique genius for domestic harmony, one that it is entitled to visit on Yugoslavs, Iraqis, Afghans, Libyans and others alike. At least until recently, each hesitant dawn has been followed by bloody dusk*.

The mood of the nation. the mood of individual communities can change and politicians who represent those communities consequently change in their opinions too – that is the nature of democracy. They say great leaders are principled enough to be initiators of change rather than going along with whatever the people want – Pilate of course would fall into the latter category.

Former NI Secretary Peter Hain has said there should be an end to prosecutions over Northern Ireland's Troubles.

It would mean no-one would be prosecuted for the 3,000 unsolved murders during 30 years of violence.

Some have said that justice still needs to be pursued.

I was deeply moved by a story that john Bell told in his weekend with us back in November. He told about his encounters with people in South Africa after apartheid had been abandoned. The Truth and reconciliation commission had been set up to try and heal the divisions between black and whites. The principle was the liberation of truth telling. Not everyone wanted it – especially those in the white community. John said that healing will not happen between communities or individuals unless you enter into the pain of the one offended. He told the story of how a white church had been attacked y black youths. A bomb had been thrown into Sunday morning congregation and then shoots had been fired. The youths had been caught and incarcerated.

15 years later the killers stood before the truth and reconciliation commission. The pastor of the church who had seen his wife die in his arms on that day stood before them and asked them do you remember who killed my wife? Why did you do it?

One of men owned up to it. He said there was a civil war going on. They were part of it and they were just obeying orders. Going along with the crowd you could say.

The pastor asked them whether they were sorry for what they did could they understand his grief.

The men said they deeply regretted causing him pain. They apologized. But then they said to the pastor he had a graveside to go and to grieve his dead wife. During the apartheid regime white police officers could come in the night and arrest their brothers and fathers and take them away and they never saw them again. They had no gravesides to kneel by and grieve their loss.

The pastor said to John bell, ‘when I heard the truth of their sin, it released me to release them’. The killers went into a side room where they were met by the surviving members of the white church, who then proceeded to embrace them through their tears.

John Bell reflected on the pastor’s tale and suggested that where enmity still exists, where there is no truth and understanding, there will never be total reconciliation. Unless truth is known heart to heart, experience to experience, there will never be total reconciliation.

This Holy Week saw a crowd welcome Jesus and a crowd reject Jesus. Through it all Jesus remained true to himself and to the passion of God for this world. As we approach the cross we are confronted with our guilt and shame, our sin and enmity. As we seek to understand what put Jesus on the cross may we find that deep reconciliation with God and ourselves and may from that reconciliation flow deep peace.

The full text of the following sermon is available at www.Sermons.com.

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[Members: Matthew 21 the sermon titled “When to Take the Shirt off Your Back” by Leonard Sweet]

 “Everyone else is doing it.”

1. J D Crossan: The Last Week – with M. Borg, SPCK [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. B B Taylor; Altar to the World, SPCK 2009 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. S Jenkins, Guardian Online Comment is free 9th april 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)