



Sermon:- 20th March 2016

When the Cheering Stops

In the spring sunshine of a Middle Eastern city the crowds gather and cheer the arrival of their perceived Liberator. Their greetings are offered with enthusiastic shouts and the waving of palm branches.

No – not Jerusalem in 30AD ... but Baghdad in 2003.

But how quickly things changed. Enthusiasm turned ugly in some places... looting and mob violence emerged... and we are reminded of the volatility and fickleness of crowds. Even as early as the following Wednesday evening one commentator said “Let’s not forget that in situations like this, people are capable of thinking two opposite things at once”. And a day later another commented “A jubilant crowd today can become an angry mob tomorrow”.

Just in case we are tempted to think that the scenario painted in our reading today is an unlikely one, this serves to remind us that, as just *one* of the more recent examples of mob psychology, today’s liberator and hero is tomorrow’s scapegoat and whipping boy. Adulation turns to revulsion and approbation to hate.

Wind the clock back 2000 years. Jerusalem... spring... a crowd... enthusiastically shouting.. joyfully praising... eagerly waving palm branches as the popular preacher from Nazareth... the miracle worker from the North... the healer from Galilee ... enters the city on a donkey... a sure sign that this is the One who is fulfilling the ancient prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. The Liberator is arriving, a hero’s welcome, palm branches waving. This humble carpenter, this homeless vagrant, being greeted and cheered and adored as if he was a king! As an opening act on the drama that was to be played out that week it could hardly have been more spectacular. And of course all the principal characters were there. Jesus, the Jewish priests, Peter, Judas, Pilate, all waiting to play their part in the events of the coming week.

Only a few days later the cheering crowd has become the jeering mob. The shouts of praise replaced by the cries of “Crucify”! On Palm Sunday Jesus enters Jerusalem in the company of his disciples, his followers and a crowd of worshippers... on Friday he

leaves for a hill just outside the city wall ... with even his disciples (all except the faithful John) having fled.

How quickly things change. When it is all going well, everyone wants to be part of it ... when it turns sour, everyone slinks away.

When the cheering stops the cries turn to ones of bitterness and rage. Hosanna, Lord, save us, became Crucify.When the cheering stopped, the crowd turned against Jesus, the adulation became anger, the hosannas turned to hatred, the cheering to curses. How quickly moods change. How easily even a large crowd turns. How often yesterday's heroes are today's villains. And for the actors in this drama, when the cheering stopped, darker emotions, more sinister objectives took its place.

The Jewish priests, of course, had never cheered Jesus, and the sounds of the adoring crowd must have been bitter to their hearts. They feared, hated and despised Jesus. They were looking for a way to put an end to his ministry. When the cheering stopped the plotting began.

What did it mean for Judas when the cheering stopped? Judas seems to have been ambitious. Some scholars believe that he may have been a zealot, part of a sect which believed the Messiah would come in power and take up arms to free the Jews. He wanted Jesus to exercise his power differently - to overthrow the Roman government rather than heal the sick. Perhaps Judas saw the crowd's reception as encouraging. Might he have seen this as an encouragement for Jesus to see it his way, "Take your chance, Jesus, now, with the people at your feet! With this crowd behind us we could change everything." But when the cheering stopped, for Judas, greed and selfishness took over. He entered another world, a world of materialism and betrayal.

In the governor's palace Pilate would not have been part of the cheering crowd, but he would have been well aware of what was happening. When Jesus was brought before him on these charges he well knew that they were trumped up by the Jewish priests and so would not stand up to scrutiny. When the cheering stopped, Pilate was faced with a dilemma. How was he to handle this delicate situation? He had already had his knuckles rapped by the Roman authorities for his relationship with the Jews which was a difficult and troubled one, constantly threatening to spill over into violence. These Jewish leaders were powerful, and he knew what could happen when a crowd turned

nasty. But there was no crime under Roman law for which Jesus could be executed. He was afraid, and so Pilate nailed his colours firmly to the fence. He abdicated his responsibility, and allowed the crowd to judge. When the cheering stopped.... Pilate washed his hands!

And Peter. Poor, cowardly, misjudged and impetuous Peter. What happened for Peter when the cheering stopped? Peter must have been ecstatic when they entered Jerusalem to the hail of the crowd. He had urged Jesus not to go to Jerusalem, because Jesus had predicted that he would die if they did. Jesus' response to Peter then had been "get thee behind me, Satan." Poor Peter must have been dreading this journey, Jesus, walking open-eyed into his own death... but here... It looked as though it might be alright after all. A hero's welcome. Perhaps everything would turn out well in the end.

Then the cheering stopped, and what happened to Peter? He got scared. His firm convictions and solid commitments turned to weak vacillations and cowardly waverings when he was faced with disappointment and danger. Fear took a grip when faith was challenged and he denied his Lord, not once, but three times.

And lastly, for Barabbas, what happened when the cheering stopped? He gained his freedom. In a sense his place in this drama is a picture of our own. Jesus died in his place. As a result of the crowds change of mind Barabbas was released, and literally through Jesus' death, he found life.

Barabbas' role in the Holy week drama is akin to ours, for like us he found life through Jesus' death. But is that where our similarity to these first century characters ends?

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We come Sunday by Sunday to worship God, we sing praises and join in prayers which praise him. But when we leave here on a Sunday morning, having sung praises to God, do these praises echo in our hearts through the week? What do we shout after we have called Hosanna?

Does it surprise us that the crowd was so fickle? Or do we recognise in our own responses a faint echo of the same phenomenon? I often find, when I am tempted to criticise or pass judgement on someone for behaviour which seems outrageous, that if I stop, and honestly look at myself, I can see echoes of the same behaviour in myself. And even if I don't, can I honestly say that in their shoes I wouldn't act in the same way?

I am all too capable of saying one thing and doing another, despite my best intentions. I am all too capable of not speaking out when I think I should for fear of what others might say. I am all too capable of sitting on the fence for fear of offending people.

These characters we have considered today are not unusual, they are not particularly bad people, they are normal; they are human. Are there traits we might share with them, even if on a smaller scale? At home, at work, can we sometimes be too much like Judas, preoccupied with power and materialism in a way that overrides the feelings of worship on the Sunday. Are we sometimes like Pilate, too indecisive or too fearful to take a stand for something we know in our hearts is right? In Peter's position would we have been stronger? Or are we often tempted to deny that we have a faith for fear of what others might think or say?

If we had been there, when the crowd started to shout "Crucify", what would we have done?

Whatever we might or might not have done, whether we would have been weak or strong, faithful or faithless, we know this. In the midst of all the hurt, the horror, the humiliation of that 24 hours, Jesus did two things. Firstly, he took the time to wash his disciples' feet, taking the part of a servant. Humbling himself so that they might be clean. And in that act modelling the kind of love he wanted them to show for one another.

And on the cross dying, he said, Father, forgive them, they know not what they do... Whatever we might have done, or might yet do, or think or say. Whatever good thing we might leave undone, he says it to us too ... Father, forgive them, they know not what they do

And so, like Barabbas, do we go from this place knowing that Jesus died to give us life? Do we go from this place knowing that he went through the horror of death on a cross so that we might find the way back to God? Do we go with the praises we have sung still ringing in our ears? And can we allow that knowledge and that experience give us the strength to continue to worship him through whatever we face in the days to come? Because when the cheering stops, the hard work of living the life of faith begins.

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