**Worship and Palm Sunday**

Palm Sunday – the day that Jesus arrived in Jerusalem at the start of week that would end in his death and resurrection.

I am going to amalgamate the story from the gospels.

The great crowd that had come to the Passover festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to follow him. The crowd in the city went to meet him I because they heard that he had performed that sign.

Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields and spread them on the road

As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the followers began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen. They 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!”

The shouts of the crowd had become a rhythmic chant and from the city, the singing could be heard coming nearer and nearer.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The miracle of the raising from the dead of Lazarus echoes through Jerusalem like a roll of thunder. How could it be that Jesus of Nazareth was anything but the Christ of God, the Messiah.

The streets of Jerusalem were thronged with foreign pilgrims come for Passover, as well as the usual crowd of a busy city: Pharisees, beggars, merchants, servants, women and children[[2]](#footnote-2)

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 Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

There was such an uproar of praise, such a demonstration of worship.

As we continue our Lenten theme of worship and as we consider worship on this day, a week before Easter, we can see the exuberant praise of the people. Their messiah, the Christ, had come. Break out the best crockery, uncellar the best bottle of wine, put out the buntings over the street.

The prophesies of the old were being realised. God was coming to take the nation of Israel out of bondage to the Romans, he had come to establish the kingdom of David forever, he would vanquish those who opposed Israel, and he would make Israel great again.

We have waited and waited for generations – it seems forever – for this to happen and now it was happening before our very eyes

Just as God through Moses took us out of Egypt and to the Promised Land, so here was our Messiah to take us out of bondage to the Romans to establish a kingdom forever.

It is appropriate to worship extravagantly – to path the road with our cloaks so the king could ride over them – for us to rip down leafy branches and wave hosanna with them as he rides through – for us to sing and praise.

That’s my interpretation of the thoughts of the people at that time.

Jesus, fully realising that much of the praise which he had been receiving is shallow and is based upon the identification of himself with the expected earthly political messiah breaks into loud weeping[[4]](#footnote-4)

Luke 19: 41 *As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”*

Let us bounce forward a few days.

A few days later, the crowd in Jerusalem cries “Crucify him!” The one who was to save his people was—only a few days after the triumphal entry—led to his humiliating execution, an excruciating punishment reserved for the seditious political enemies of the Roman Empire.

What happened to change their minds? Why did he go from hero to zero in the eyes of the crowd in such a short period of time?

The crowds turned against Jesus because their hearts had grown spiritually cold. Jesus had been with them three years, performing miracles and teaching them the truth about God. What more evidence did they need that He was the Savior?[[5]](#footnote-5) Yet they turned away from him.

They were fully expecting that Jesus would declare Himself to be their king once he got into Jerusalem and would lead a revolt against the Romans who were occupying the Jewish nation. In other words, they hoped Jesus would become a political leader.

But Jesus didn’t come to set up a new political system. He came instead to transform us by changing our hearts and saving us from our sins by His death and resurrection.

He declared during that last week, “*My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight. … My kingdom is from another place”* (John 18:36).

This deeply disappointed those who hoped He would throw out the hated Roman occupiers.

Their hopes and aspiration of what God would do was thrown on its ear and they did not like it. What he was doing was not what they expected him to do at all.

They did not understand what God was doing through Jesus, and they turned from him.

In this I hear an echo to John the Baptist’s question to Jesus: Are you the one or should we wait for someone else?

The crowd in this case decided that he was not the one, and they turned their backs on him.

Their disappointment became bitter and vindictive.

The people had hopes of, and the Sanhedrin had fears of, an uprising of the Jewish people against the Roman occupiers, with Jesus as their leader. They cheered because here was their Saviour come at last, riding forth in majesty to deliver them from their enemies

By saying that his kingdom was not of this world, Jesus showed the crowds a very different picture of God’s power than what they expected—a very different picture of God’s power than what they wanted. The crowd turned on Jesus because he did not live up to their needs and expectations. He did not champion their notion of justice. He did not reveal their image of God.

Jesus came to proclaim the God whose power is revealed to be something very different from what we might hope for. Whatever we might mean when we call God all-powerful, it now has to be rooted in the one who loved the sinners no matter what happened to him.

The change in attitude in the crowd was promoted by the Scribes and Pharisees who were seeding the crowd with lies. But behind them was the deceiver with his half-truths and lies. They wanted Jesus dead, so they incited a riot. Crowd mentality and bystander mentality will follow the loudest voice, so when the cry went up, “Crucify Him!”, it was picked up willingly by those who wanted to be on the accepted side.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Thinking on this story and its dramatic turn around and continuing our theme of worship today during this period of Lent, I want to ask the questions:

What affects our worship? What causes us to stop worshipping?

Who is whispering in our ears, to turn us from worshipping God?

What happens when the plan we have for God are not his plans? Does our worship turn to disappointment, like the crowds in Jerusalem, expecting one thing but God delivering something different?

What about when our needs are not met. Do we become like those with crowd mentality or bystander mentality – turn away or do nothing?

What is our picture of God and what do we expect God to do in our own lives?

If he doesn’t deliver, will we stop worshipping him?

When people with chronic illness are not healed.

When people with terminal illness die, despite the prayers of friends.

When children turn to drugs and self-destructive lifestyles and despite our prayers, continue in that way of life?

When our finances run out? When we are made redundant? When good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people?

How do we respond to a God in those circumstances?

A lady called Pamela Brunson had a son Andrew who was held hostage in a Turkish prison for two years for teaching Christian truth. In an article, she writes: When we limit God to a human image of Him, we may be blind-sided when He doesn’t act within that box. When there is suffering, both massive and personal, that leaves us gasping, we cry out like Jesus on the cross, *“My God, My God, why?”* and we get the same answer He did. At this point, many walk away, saying, “If that’s what God is like, I want none of Him.” When many left Jesus, *He asked His friends, “Will you also go?” Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life”* (John 6:68). [Perhaps we will allow our passion for God and his church to just dwindle]. Settle it that there are many questions that will not be answered in this life. Put tormenting doubts and fears in God’s lap and fix your eyes on Jesus. Choose to endure through faith, standing in the dark [or when the tide has gone out in our lives]. Isaiah 50:10 says: “*Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God.”* (Isaiah 50:10, NIV). Unanswered prayer? Trust that He knows more than we do.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Brunson continued her testimony: “There have been times when God didn’t meet my expectation. My 16-year-old daughter, Julie, was a runaway with a group of drinking kids. She knew the Lord. I thought God would heal her and use her testimony for His glory. But she died on a Florida highway. I felt wounded by God and told Him so. But even in my woundedness, I never considered turning away from God.”

Brunston’s story is not new and will not be the last.

Think of Job, facing terrible afflictions and loss. His family was destroyed. His children were dead. His vast herds stolen. His health failed. His wife told him to curse God and die. His friends did nothing but criticize and point fingers at him. But he could say

Job 13:15 *Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him.*

Job certified, that though things had not turned out like he wanted, he was going to maintain his ways. He was going to keep on doing what he had always done, which was praying to God 24/7.

Think of the prophet Habakkuk 3:17-18

*Though the fig tree does not bud and no fruit is on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though the sheep are cut off from the fold and no cattle are in the stalls, yet I will exult in the LORD; I will rejoice in the God of my salvation!*

Think of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refused to bow to the statue erected by Nebuchadnezzar the king and were told they would be put in the fiery furnace if they did not worship it:

Daniel 3:17-18 *If the God whom we serve exists, then He is able to deliver us from the blazing fiery furnace and from your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden statue you have set up.”*

Think of Paul writing to Timothy

2 Timothy 1:12 *For this reason, even though I suffer as I do, I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day.*

The response to their circumstances of God doing something different to what they would have liked – sickness, failure of livelihood, persecution, captivity - was one of worship.

We are not God, and we do not know the ways of God, no matter how many theology books you read, or social media posts you listen to.

Isaiah 55:8-9 *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

So, it should not surprise us that God’s answer to our problems does not match our perception of the answer.

Yet we know that God is good and that God is love, so we have reason to trust him

What does our worship look like when God does things we find inexplicable? Do we give up and walk away, or do we like Pamela Brunston, press in acknowledging we do not know the reasons for everything?

1 Thessalonians 5:18 18 *In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*

The scripture does not say in “every GOOD thing”, but in everything, give thanks.

That is hard ask. Thankfully we have the Holy Spirit and others around us to encourage and help us.

We need to hesitate to assume the gospel doesn't "work" when we simply cannot see the big picture. When we struggle to connect truth with life, we must embrace the limitations of our understanding and also the limitlessness of God's. Our inability to understand Jesus should give cause for worship, not cause for doubt. (Wayne Stiles*)[[8]](#footnote-8)*

Let’s pray…

1. Joy Harington *Jesus of Nazareth 123* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Harington 123 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An amalgamation of the gospels [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. William Hendriksen *The Gospel of John* 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://billygraham.org/answers/why-did-the-crowds-turn-against-jesus-during-the-last-few-days-of-his-life [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://dianasymons.com/jesus/3-reasons-why-the-crowds-turned-against-jesus/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://decisionmagazine.com/when-god-doesnt-meet-our-expectations/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.insight.org/resources/article-library/individual/when-jesus-fails-your-expectations [↑](#footnote-ref-8)