

Palm Sunday - 5 April 2009  
By Reverend Susanna Pain

Hosanna!

And later crucify him!

I am in the crowd. I have such high hopes, misplaced perhaps, but sincere, of a Messiah, a restorer of Israel.

I follow in the safety of the crowd, watching, caught up.

Only to turn – influenced by powerful people – crucify him! Crucify him!

Fickle woman! What do I truly believe in my heart? I can't believe I am so easily led. Yet I am.

In retrospect I can stand up, be brave, but for now, I run away, like Peter – pushed to the limit. All my protestations marks against me.

Yet still he restores me. Life restores me. 'Do you love me?' He says to me, the betrayer. Do you love me? You know that I do – You know how bad I feel, how I, even I, especially I have let you down, run away to safety in the crowd.

Yet face me and ask me the questions, the one question that goes to the heart of the matter. 'Do you love me?'

That's what it comes down to, doesn't it? You love me.  
No matter what, you love me. So despite my fickle changes, my cowardice and fear, you still love me.  
Somehow this is the meaning of it all for me, hiding in the crowd when I should be speaking out that truth: you love me.  
And I do my best to love you in return. Judged by my own action or inaction.  
Judged, not by you but by me.

This procession into Jerusalem – this praising, treating you like royalty, misses the point. It's a bit of street theatre, a set up. You are riding a donkey. Riding yes, making a point, yes but the point is multilayered – not triumphalist, but firm, clear, entering Jerusalem, claiming your place – but on a donkey, not a stallion – humility, clarity – these are your virtues.

Acting out your own parable you invite me to reflect what are you doing, Jesus?  
What are you saying here? Riding on a donkey?  
Your leadership is in marked contrast to roman soldiers or even the religious hierarchy with their finery.

To follow you is to be pared back, to be open to the unexpected, to be pulled up short, riding on a donkey... stubborn animal, not fit for a king.

Yet we miss the point, and cry our hosannas. All our hopes surging.

Jesus, remember me, when you came into your kingdom. Your companions in death were criminals, and we who thought ourselves righteous watch... hidden in the crowd.

A story:

*The Wise man, Artaban, in his pursuit of finding the King of the Jews, misses his three friends who set out before him: Casper, Melchior, and Balthazar. He misses the Christ Child too because his adventures lead him into strange encounters with dying beggars, and frightened mothers who whom he gives two jewels saved for the Child. He returns to Jerusalem after a fruitless search in Egypt and there for thirty-three years he still diligently searches for the child.*

*This year it is Passover time. Artaban, now an old man, notes an unusual commotion and he inquires as to its cause. People answer him, "We are going to the place called Golgotha, just outside the walls of the city, to see two robbers and a man named Jesus of Nazareth hanged on a cross. The man calls himself the Son of God and Pilate has sent him to be crucified because he says that he is the King of the Jews."*

*Artaban knows instinctively that this is the King he has been searching for. So he rushes to the scene. But on his way he meets a young girl being sold into slavery. She sees his royal robes and falls at his feet pleading with him to rescue her. His heart is moved and he gives away his last jewel for her ransom.*

*Just then, darkness falls over the land and the earth shakes and great stones fall into the streets, one of them upon Artaban, crushing his head. As he lay dying in the arms of the girl he has just redeemed (ransomed), he cries out weakly, "Three and thirty years I looked for thee, Lord, but I have never seen thy face nor ministered to thee!"*

*But then a voice comes from heaven, strong and kind, and says, "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of my brethren or sisters, you did it to me." Artaban's face grows calm and peaceful. His long journey is ended. He has found his King!*

*From Storytelling, Imagination and Faith, William J Bausch Twenty Third Publications Mystic Connecticut 1984*

Mixed messages, street theatre.

Reminiscent of past heroes riding into battle, but he, is on a donkey.

And the play is anti-climactic. In Mark's gospel, he enters the temple, looks around, then comes out again and goes home! The theatrics then are left for another day!

What is going on here?

Most of the narrative is taken up with the preparation. What are we to make of this – this dramatic action at the beginning of Holy Week?

We're so close to the climax now but we are teased. He comes, riding on a donkey.

Our ears prick up – a donkey?

Who is this we follow? What action will he take? Riding into Jerusalem, looking for peace, not conflict. Still, the crowd, country folk mostly wave branches, lay down their clothes, treat him like royalty. These are not the urbanites, the sophisticated city dwellers. These are peasants, in from the fields. They capture the excitement and we

do too, carried along by the crowd. Any doubts, any fears we may have are pushed aside for the moment.

It may be a different story next week on Friday. So we are swept along, excited, hopeful, present, hidden in the crowd. Is he enjoying the ride? Or are his thoughts elsewhere?