

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of 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.
Zechariah 9:9

READING: **John 12:12-19**

PUPPET SONG: https://youtu.be/pR64fg_ygA

TALK - Tom

Many years ago there used to be this thing you might have heard of called a 'record shop' and in those days if you wanted to listen to music you had to actually go into the shop, find the recording of the music you wanted to hear, carry it to the desk and buy it using actual money.

Now when I was at university, 20 years ago, there was a great excitement that a new record shop, an HMV one was opening. And not only was the shop opening but there was going to be a surprise special guests coming to perform at the store to celebrate it's first day!

My friends and I were very excited, wondering which cool band it would be - Oasis were too famous so it wouldn't be them, but there were loads of great guitar bands around, and apparently the last one that opened got Travis to play! So it's bound to be someone good!

On the morning we walked through the wind to the store for the appointed time, only to discover a huge crowd had already formed and we couldn't see the signs or stage and had no idea which cool band we would see. Finally the moment arrived, the band walked out onto the stage and it was not a cool guitar band, it was Atomic Kitten. Three girls from Liverpool who mimed a terrible cover version of a Blondie song and then wandered off. Leaving me and my friends to walk back home dejectedly, in the wind and rain.

We went to HMV that day expecting something exciting, full of hope - at last someone amazing was going to appear in our town! But we left disappointed at what we experienced.

Now my experience at the opening of HMV is not unlike the experience of the people in the crowd who saw Jesus ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. A lot of them had high hopes, and as we read, many of them left disappointed and confused. And with all that's happening in our lives at the moment confusion and disappointment are emotions we have become all too familiar with ourselves.

So let's see what the bible says. John starts by telling us that there was a large crowd in town for the Passover festival. The crowd had not come to Jerusalem because of Jesus, they had come to celebrate the biggest Jewish festival of the year so the streets would have been packed!

Now because there were so many tourists and visitors in the city there would have been a lot of news-sharing going on, a lot of people catching up and telling their friends what's been happening. In the midst of quarantine being surrounded by crowds and catching up with friends seems a long way off! But imagine at the end of this when, we're all allowed out again, how exciting it will be to talk to people we haven't seen for weeks or months. That's the level of enthusiasm that people would have been talking with in Jerusalem, for some this is their big family gathering, it could be the only time they visit the City this year so everyone would be talking.

And what were they talking about? Not the best place to find toilet rolls or hand sanitiser, the big news back then was this man Jesus. Who'd a wandering preacher, a wise teacher who had apparently done miracles. In verse 17 we read that "the people who had been with Jesus when he called Lazarus out of the grave had reported what had happened." and did you hear what he did last week? Last week, he raised a man from the dead! Lazarus has been dead for 4 days but Jesus brought him back to life! Honestly you have got to go see him for yourself!

There would have been all kinds of rumours swirling about who Jesus really was, maybe he's John the Baptist, maybe he's a madman maybe he's Elijah or another prophet, maybe he's a great revolutionary leader who will finally lead us to freedom from the Romans!

So there would have been a huge level of excitement from the people when they heard Jesus was approaching the city. They grabbed branches to wave and they shouted Hosanna as he arrived, (This is because some of the crowd thought he was a prophet and this is how you welcome a prophet!) Before this moment most of this crowd would never have seen Jesus, they would not have heard him speak, they are visitors from far away and they do not know Him. All they know is the rumours they have heard of miracles and revolution!

They expect a wise man, a mighty warrior, a great man that they can all follow to freedom. What they get is the somewhat comical sight of a grown man riding a small donkey. Jesus would have been too tall to ride gracefully, his feet would have brushed the ground as they go - imagine your dad riding a child's bike! It would have looked peculiar, not the inspiring image the crowd had wanted or expected. John tells us that "The disciples did not understand this" and if they didn't get it yet, how could the crowd of strangers and onlookers?

So how do people respond to this event? How do they respond to Jesus? There are three different motivations that John records at the end of this passage and each one has something helpful for us to take on board during this peculiar period of our lives.

The first thing John notes is that “The people who had been with Jesus when he called Lazarus out of the grave and raised him from death had reported what had happened.” The people who had actually seen Jesus in action, those who had heard him and met him couldn’t help but tell everyone all about Him. The crowd at Lazarus’s resurrection would not have been able to stop talking about the incredible thing they had seen or about the amazing man who made it happen.

Now as we know, even at this point in the story people talking favourably about Jesus were putting themselves in a dangerous position. The pharisees and religious authorities were trying to find ways to stop him. The Roman rulers hated anyone causing trouble in the Empire - speaking up for Jesus was a dangerous choice - you could face severe punishment, even death! And perhaps the fear of those consequences is what leads to the people choosing Barrabbas over Jesus in a few days time.

So what does this say to us? It says that no matter what consequences we may face, we should be talking about Jesus. If you have met Jesus, if you’ve seen him do amazing things, if you know him - don’t keep it inside, share your experiences, share the difference he makes in your life! Now, more than ever, people need to hear good news, make sure you share it.

The second response John tells us is that the raising Lazarus from the dead “ was why the crowd met him—because they heard that he had performed this miracle.” So the first group talked about it, next group heard about it and investigated for themselves. They didn’t just believe the rumours, they didn’t just accept it because their friend told them - they went to find out for themselves and they went expecting miracles!

Do we do that? Do we make sure to investigate the things we hear? To find out things for ourselves - in the time of fake news and facebook hoaxes we need to be rigorous in this! Don’t just believe everything you hear - find out for yourself.

And if you don’t know Jesus yet, don’t just believe the pros and cons you get from others - try to find him for yourself!

Finally John tells us about the response of the Pharisees in the crowd, the religious leaders who have been trying to bring Jesus down for months. And their response is fascinating.

The others who’ve come to see miracles or a war hero go home disappointed, they don’t see what they hoped for today (but they get plenty of opportunity to witness it later) but it is the Pharisees who see what’s really happening.

John writes in verse 19- “The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, we are not succeeding at all! Look, the whole world is following him!”

Most of the crowd left disappointed by what they saw of Jesus but the Pharisees recognise that something big is happening. They have no idea just how big but they

know that this is not simply a man on a Donkey. Perhaps their knowledge of the Prophets meant they recognised the biblical significance of what Jesus was doing but they saw it was part of something big. Though they would not admit it; through all the confusion of the crowd, they saw God moving.

We live in strange times. Things are disorientating, unsettling and scary. But through all this confusion we can still see God moving! We still recognise that “the whole world follows Him”. We can still experience his great love and share in his hope for the future. We can trust him now and always.

If we know Jesus we should talk of him, we should expect him to be at work and and we should be looking for signs of Jesus today.

The crowd gathered to see amazing things but how often do we actually expect God to do something? How little faith do we actually have in His power? In times like these, when there is so much suffering and stress in the news every day - do we actually expect God to transform this situation? Because, whether we see it or not, whether we believe it or not, God is already at work! He is already working miracles of healing, he is already changing things for better. He is always at work throughout the world - so look for these moments where his love breaks through, where great and good things happen - and then tell others about them!

20 years ago I stood listening to Atomic Kitten in the wind and rain, afterwards I couldn't even get into HMV to buy the CD I wanted because the crowd was too big so I went home confused and disappointed because that was not what I had hoped for.

Over the last few weeks I've felt more confused about the future than ever before. I've been disappointed by cancelling events I was looking forward to at church and not being able to go on Holiday to celebrate my 40th birthday in a couple of weeks. I've felt stressed about the present and scared about what the future might hold for me and family.

But through it all I have seen Jesus at work, He's been present in the online conversations and the zoom meetings. He's been with us in the way communities are becoming more open and responsive to those in need. He's been sat with us in our isolation and in homeschooling and home-working. He's been with front-line, key workers in their vital roles. Looking at the world today we might feel confused or face disappointments or fear but remember that God is at work in all this. And like the crowd on that Palm Sunday, we might not recognise what's happening right now but when we look back we will say wow! “The whole world is following him.”

SONG - FAITHFUL ONE

PRAYERS:

Lord, you created all things and you hold all things together,
you make the world work,

sometimes we find it hard to see you in action,
sometimes the world feels too overwhelming,
but you are present, you are with us and you are working in our world and in our lives.

Let us pray to the Lord,
who is our refuge and stronghold.
For the health and well-being of our nation,
that all who are fearful and anxious
may be at peace and free from worry:

Lord, hear us,

Lord, graciously hear us.

For the isolated and housebound,
that we may be alert to their needs,
and care for them in their vulnerability:

Lord, hear us,

Lord, graciously hear us.

For our homes and families,
our schools and young people,
and all in any kind of need or distress:

Lord, hear us,

Lord, graciously hear us.

For a blessing on our local community,
that our neighbourhoods may be places of trust and friendship,
where all are known and cared for:

Lord, hear us,

Lord, graciously hear us.

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,
to the mercy and protection of God.

Father, we thank you that you sent your Son Jesus to be our King and Saviour. We thank you that he came to his people in triumph, but also in humility, and was willing to die so that all who believe in him may be forgiven, may become your people, and may share in eternal life. Forgive us for the times we have refused to believe, for the times when we have not listened, and the times when we have been unwilling to follow him on the way, and work in us by your Holy Spirit to make us the people you want us to be.. In Jesus' Name.

Amen.

SONG - WHEN THE TEARS FALL

BLESSING -