

Hymns: **262** **“All glory, laud, and honour”**
 76 **“Give me joy in my heart”**
 “Lift high the cross”

Readings: **Matthew 21:1-11**
 Psalm 118:1-2,19-29

“LEADERSHIP”

I was brought up by a generation that had lived through the 1930s. That was a time of economic depression, moral despair, deep disgruntlement and disfiguring poverty. The people around me, when they chose to speak of it, did so with horror. They spoke of rampant disease, unnecessary death, soup kitchens, hunger marches, and life on the dole.

This dark decade threw up a succession of leaders who all promised Nirvana, Utopia, Shangri La, Paradise, a Final Solution. There were Franco’s phalangists, Mussolini’s muscle men, Hitler’s hate-brigade. They were beckoning the benighted poor towards their Fascist and National Socialist programmes.

Meanwhile, Joseph Stalin was urging the workers of the world to unite, to pull down the pillars of capitalism and to rise up with one voice. Revolution was what they were preaching and stirring up.

Leaders of left and right claimed to be able to deal with the people’s alienation, disaffection, and crushing poverty. For ordinary people trapped in low self-esteem and poor economic circumstances, these increasingly clamorous voices beguiling them and alluring them with such rich promises of salvation must sometimes have seemed irresistible and yet, now that the dust has settled, it’s obvious that the most abiding symbol of Hitler’s rhetoric and political leadership was and remains a concentration camp. His promise to “make Germany great again” could only happen by annihilating the Jews and the Gypsies and the homosexuals. And bringing misery on his people.

And the most abiding symbol of Stalin’s rhetoric and political leadership was and remains a gulag. And his promise to “make Russia great again” could only happen by stifling intellectual freedoms and enslaving the Russian people and their neighbours too.

So what? Why open a sermon on Palm Sunday on this note? Why this harking back to the past?

Because the basic dynamics of politics and sociology of the 1930s and the Great Depression are, I believe, present both in the scriptural narrative we are thinking

about this morning and, curiously, in what's happening to us in our contemporary world. And we must not be afraid of looking at them. Indeed, we dare not turn our gaze away.

First let's look at the scripture. We heard the story of the triumphal entry which Jesus made to Jerusalem. But I've always had a question about this event.

Where did the crowd come from? What attracted them? What did they want? How did they perceive Jesus and his ability to give them what they were looking for?

And the answer? They came from communities which had seen Jesus at work. They saw him at first hand, mixing and mingling with them, greeting them and eating with them, sharing their life. He didn't impose regulations or taxes on them from some distant office or holed up in committee rooms and debating chambers. Not for him membership of the "temple bubble", a self-contained environment with its gossip and corruption and elitism. He got out and about. He knew the people. He heard their moaning and their groaning. He had his finger on the pulse. He saw their suffering and responded to it; he heard their cries and listened to them; he seemed to have eyes in the back of his head. He saw people, he noticed them, his heart went out to them. In the list of those he reached and touched stand clearly in my mind a bleeding woman, social outcasts, a man begging by the roadside, a blind man lingering by a pool, a madman harming himself in a graveyard, a leper desperate for healing, a widow grieving for her dead son, a crowd desperate with hunger, a conscience-stricken tax collector.

Enough! I could go on but I think the point is made.

The people had had time and opportunity to assess his character, his integrity, the genuine nature of his compassion and fellow feeling.

It was so different from the blithe utterances of a distant and impersonal political class whose mouths spoke words that never turned into deeds. And also different from the imperial power that crushed their sense of national pride while reducing them to a vassal state, ruling them through their military might and the threat of armed force.

These were the disgruntled and the oppressed and the economically exploited, the disaffected of their day. They wanted to be out of the entreaties of Rome. We'd call that JEXIT (Jewish exit from the Roman Empire) or, to be more accurate, JEXODUS. They wanted another Moses to lead them from the Dead Sea to green pastures and living waters. They were looking for another Elijah to take on and destroy the prophets of Baal.

This was the crowd. That's where they came from. And here was Jesus, taken up by all of them as the very embodiment of the one they were waiting for. "Hooray" they shouted; "hosanna!". They broke into their hymn; "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." All of this amounted to a wonderful, spontaneous, ear-splitting, and sky-rending "Hip, hip, hip, hosanna!"

And Jesus himself? Imagine him. From the Mount of Olives he had a spectacular view of the city of Jerusalem with its walls, its bazaars, its narrow streets, its Golden Gate, and all dominated by King Herod's temple. Just down the hill, across the Kedron Valley, and into David's capital city. An amazingly short distance to go. And all this crowd on his side. Their cheering support would have multiplied the crowd as he made progress towards the city centre. It could have become an uprising, a revolution. Who could tell where it would end? Certainly the Romans would be upset and send the soldiers out. But might this be the occasion when even their arms would not prevail?

If Jesus thought these things he never let on. He got onto the back of a young donkey that had never been ridden before. And as he rode, he seemed to be getting astride a definition of leadership that had never been tried before. He resisted the force of the crowd's expectations and stuck fast to his own deepest convictions. He had not come to stir up political unrest. He had come in quite another guise and to fulfil an entirely different promise. Less would be more for him. He had no interest in being the glorious saviour who would rescue his people in a spectacular way.

He paid a price for that decision. The reputational damage, at least in the short time, was enormous. They laughed at him for his foolishness. They derided his weakness. They let him know that, having had his chance and having failed to take it, there was nothing he could offer them.

Populism, nationalism, isolationism, exceptionalism, were of little or no interest to Jesus. He offered a program for long-term gains rather than short-term fixes.

Ah Jesus, would that thou wert living at this hour, England (and the whole world) hath need of thee.

This is the week when the BP CEO took a 40% pay cut – he went home with a mere £9.3 million. This was the week when we heard how overseas speculators have been investing in British property not only in London but in towns and cities across the land, thus pushing up property prices, and thus threatening to disrupt the market. We've also heard about record domestic credit levels, we've seen people sleeping in record numbers on our streets, we've heard how wage levels have remained static since before the 2008 depression, some of our young people are working on zero hours contracts, our economy is surely heading for another fall.

And in the world around us, this is the week when chemical weapons took scores of victims. When endless slaughter continued to cut down thousands of people in the Middle East and elsewhere. When cities were turned to dust. Terror in Sweden added Stockholm to a list that ran from Paris, and London, to Berlin, and Moscow. Out of the news, miserable hordes crossing the Mediterranean and being syphoned up from war torn Middle Eastern countries continue to huddle in droves on the southern flanks of our "civilised continent". Meanwhile, droughts and earthquakes, floods and mudslides claim their victims too.

And all this misery and alienation has bred a generation of leaders who fulminate, bicker, flex their muscles, discuss economics and trade with nations well-known for their disregard for human rights.

Nationalism, populism, isolationism, exceptionalism – are on the march again. Just like the 1930s. The very forces which were resisted by Jesus on the day of his entry into Jerusalem.

A minister I admired, a man named Fred Peacock, was in his 20s during the 1930s, a young minister wet behind the ears. He found himself in London's East End where many a fascist rally under the leadership of Oswald Mosely took place. The ugliness and violence of right wing ideology was greatly in evidence. Fred Peacock wondered what he could do. Nothing, he feared. But then he did what he could. He took a simple stand into a square where the brown shirts were to meet. He erected it at one end of the square and then stood on it. In front of him on a placard were the words "God is Love". He stood there, a callow youth, in his clerical collar, identifying himself clearly as a man of God. He did not open his mouth. He just gave visual testimony to the values he believed in and to the judgement he felt those values cast on what was happening in front of him. A brave man. A simple message.

The Jesus to whom Fred Peacock witnessed was reckoned a failure, a fool, a weakling, a flop. Yet 150 years after the events we are going to be thinking about this week, his fame and his claims and his way of life had swept the entire Mediterranean world. And the ripples moved ever further out from the centre until the whole inhabited earth became aware of the name of Jesus, the fool and the weakling, the failure and the flop. Leadership yields its results over a longer stretch of time than the immediate or the short-term. And we continue to benefit from Jesus' model of leadership today.

And we should learn from it as we exercise leadership ourselves.

Amen