

Hosanna!

Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Several years ago, the Herald columnist and crossword compiler David Astle - who I'm sure many of us are familiar with - mentioned that he'd been criticised for giving the crossword clue "Hallelujah (7 letters)" to the answer "Hosanna", because despite being 'religious' words, they didn't mean the same thing. They are both Hebrew words beginning with 'H' (or the Hebrew letter 'Hey') and they are words that are used in praise, but they do not have the same meaning.

Hallelujah comes from the Hebrew phrase 'Hallalu Yah' - Hallalu (praise) and Yah/Yahweh (God). You might have noticed that several of the psalms begin and/or end with 'Praise the Lord' and have the footnote of "Hebrew: Hallelu Yah."

Hosanna is also a Hebrew exclamation or proclamation. Hosanna comes from the Hebrew word 'Hoshana' which literally means "save!" or "help". Both as an intercession and as a claim on God's power to answer the call.

In particular, by the first century AD, the cry of "Hosanna/Save now!" had become a way of identifying and praising the promised messiah – and calling on the messiah's help. So I have sympathy for David Astle's crossword clue because, in practical terms, praising God on the one hand, and calling on the messiah's power to save have, not the same, but certainly related meanings.

It's Palm Sunday today, so we do continue to cry "Hosanna!", and let's wave our palm branches and throw down our cloaks, as we remember not only Jesus' climactic approach to Jerusalem, but also Jesus' ability to 'save now!' even today.

This was not Jesus's first time going to Jerusalem, but it was clearly different than his other visits.

In many ways, Palm Sunday, or the 'Triumphal Entry' as it is often called, was the climax to Jesus' earthly ministry journey. It was a journey that started at the beginning of his ministry, when he went to the Jordan river, to be baptised by John, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted.

And after the wilderness, he began preaching the good news that the kingdom of heaven had come near, and he called his first disciples and they followed him.

We know that Jesus taught, and healed, and performed miracles and cast out demons and built up a great following. People would come – multitudes would come – to hear Jesus speak. But even as Jesus' following grew, so did the opposition – from those in authority, those who had religious and political power.

The journey to Jerusalem would have been an anxious one for Jesus' companions. In fact, the disciples were probably dreading it; Jerusalem, more than any other place would be the place where Jesus would clash with the establishment. Things were almost certain to come to a head, and in any conflict with the authorities in Jerusalem, Jesus and his followers would not likely fare too well – and of course, we know how disastrously things turned out.

As we heard in today's gospel reading, that journey was nearing its end. We heard that "...they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives". They were nearly there – in fact, from the Mount of Olives they would have had a clear view into Jerusalem and into

temple forecourt as well. Bethphage was a village itself, but also more or less an outer suburb of Jerusalem.

Over the next week, Jesus and the disciples would make the journey from the Mount of Olives into the city each day, leaving Jerusalem each evening to have some refuge from the hustle and bustle.

But the approach on that first Palm Sunday was special: “As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples [ahead]” (21:1)

Jesus gave those two disciples very specific concise instructions: ““Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me.” (21:2)

Clearly, he intended to ride into the city on those animals, which the disciples would have thought was odd – after all, they walked everywhere. It is not difficult to imagine that those two would have been surprised by how Jesus’ instructions worked out. Jesus told them that if anyone asks them why they’re untying the donkey and the colt simply to say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away. Nothing else. Simply ‘the Lord needs them’ (21:3).

Jesus tells them that if they say that, then [the owner] will send them immediately.

And sure enough, the two disciples found a donkey and a colt tied, just as Jesus told them they would. Which might not be that remarkable because donkeys would have been fairly common. The disciples untied them, and brought them to Jesus.

Matthew doesn’t tell us that anyone said anything to the disciples while they were untying the donkey and the colt... but both Mark and Luke do, and in each of those accounts the disciples say “the Lord needs it” (Lk 19:33-34, Mk 11:5-5) and they are allowed to take the colt without hindrance. I wonder if Matthew leaves it out because it wasn’t dramatic at all.

The colt and the donkey were taken by those two disciples back to Jesus and the other disciples where they were waiting on the Mount of Olives. There, the disciples threw their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them.

Matthew explains that this was “...to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet [Zechariah]: “Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’” (21:4-5)

And so, for the last two kilometres or so into Jerusalem, Jesus rode on the colt of a donkey.

And the crowd gathered.

Something big, something important, something significant not just in their lives but in the whole of history was happening.

We know the disciples had struggled to understand how Jesus as Messiah was different to the Messiah the people expected, but here he was, fulfilling the prophecy.

Would this have allayed their fears about going into Jerusalem? Would they have been encouraged by the crowds gathering and cheering “Hosanna to the Son of David!”, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (21:9)

It would have certainly been a powerful demonstration of who Jesus was.

People were shouting as they lay down their cloaks and cut branches for Jesus to ride across. It was an act of respect for a King. But this king wasn’t a king like other kings had been.

You may have heard Jesus' triumphal entry compared to a Roman parade – with Jesus' humble entry riding on a donkey contrasted with a Roman leader riding on a white charger or perhaps standing in a chariot drawn by several horses.

And yes, it is a contrast, and I'm sure that when Pontius Pilate entered Jerusalem it was with grand spectacle, but the symbolism goes even deeper – it is the fulfilment of prophecy.

Jesus was a humble king, bringing the hope that those who cried "Hosanna" longed for. But what is hope for some people, brings fear for others. The hope he brings upsets things: the ways of the world and the established hierarchies.

Jesus, in coming to Jerusalem, in humility, offers himself to the people. Ultimately, we know he would die for his people – for us. What king does that?

Jesus' humility should give us all hope. Even though we know how events would pan out over the next few days, the crowds would desert him, his disciples would desert him, and he would be betrayed and beaten and raised up on the cross – through it all there was hope. Even today, as things seem to get darker for us and those we love, and indeed for the whole world, and we see kingly power used selfishly and uncaringly and cruelly in so many places, we can still cry 'Hosanna' and put our hope in our humble king.

Although this passage is often headed the Triumphal Entry in our modern bible translations, Jesus doesn't actually enter Jerusalem until the last two verses. "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?""

You might remember another time when the whole city was stirred. Thirty odd years before today's reading, back in Matthew chapter two, the Magi came to King Herod and asked about the birth of the King of the Jews that they saw predicted in the stars. The city was disturbed then – King Herod was so disturbed that he ordered the death of any baby boys born around the area of Bethlehem.

Strangely though, after Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, the crowds didn't say "This is the messiah" but instead answered "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Some were willing to refer to him as a prophet, recognizing that Jesus' following – his popularity – didn't come from nowhere. Jesus has already changed a lot of people's lives with his teaching and miracles.

But it does seem that perhaps the mood of the crowd was beginning to turn – the cheers along those last few kilometres had faded by the time Jesus entered the city in what we remember as the Triumphal Entry. Of course, the real triumph of Jesus isn't revealed until Easter Sunday – and there was an awful lot to happen between the events of the "triumphal entry" and the resurrection.

I often reflect that being part of the church can be like the Triumphal Entry: People gather together to sing hymns of praise, and hear the scriptures and pray, and they do that as the people of God... and then the service ends, and everyone leaves and returns to being the people of the world, until next Sunday, when the people gather, and the organ plays again and all the rest of that.

We gather, like that crowd on the last couple of kilometres to Jerusalem, to praise God. But so often, we gather and then we disperse – go our separate ways until the next time.

Praising God, and praying to God, and listening for God's word shouldn't be something we only do on Sundays, or for that matter, that we only do in churches. The crowd who cheered Jesus on

his way into Jerusalem, scattered, and turned their backs on him, even when another crowd gathered on Friday and cried “Crucify him”.

And I have to wonder, how many in the crowd at the Triumphal Entry were also in crowd on Friday? When instead of praising Jesus, they were then calling for the release of Barrabas. And then the cries of ‘Hosanna! Save us!’ turned into cries of ‘Crucify him!’

We’re called by Jesus, not to be members of a crowd which gathers and disperses as the mood takes us, we’re called by Jesus to be part of his church – part of his body: the body of Christ. We continue the mission that Jesus gave his church – “Therefore” Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Mt 28:19-20)

And we do that in ways that are different for each of us, and differ for each of us over time. Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12) that “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.”

In the church we often say that there is no gift without its corresponding service. The owners of the donkey and the colt gave them to Jesus to use, simply because “The Lord needed it”.

It’s worth taking time to think about what the Lord needs of us – as individuals and as a church. Not because God “needs” our help in order to make his plan for the world – and us – work out. God doesn’t rely on any of us, but we all get to be part of the outworking of God’s plan for the world.

What can we do, as people who know Jesus as our humble king – today, tomorrow, and all our days to come? Let’s welcome Jesus who lived and died and rose again for us, into not just our city, but into our homes, our lives and our hearts.

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Hosanna! Hallelujah!

Amen.