

*John Docherty, Palm Sunday, 13 April, 2014*

**“A King on a Donkey”**

Palm Sunday. This event of Jesus entering Jerusalem to the sound of praise and adoration is one that *should* be accompanied with some kind of upbeat soundtrack. It’s arguably the high point of his ministry and one of the clearest demonstrations of his place as the One prophesied to come as the Saviour of the nation.

Entering on the foal of a donkey, being received by the crowd as the “Son of David”, are obvious and deliberate signs of his messianic identity. It’s also deliberately low-key in some respects - he is on a young donkey after all - but the crowds aren’t in any way subdued. Hosannas are everywhere, palm branches and cloaks are scattered about on his path, and the crowd meeting him outside the walls of the city are euphoric.

We have every reason to believe that the crowd welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem thought that Jesus, and his message, was the very embodiment of the aspirations expressed in the song that was played as the kids entered the service (“You’re the Voice” by John Farnham).

“We have the chance to turn the pages over  
[and get out from under this Roman rule]  
We can write what we want to write  
[and take command of our own destiny]

...

We're all someone's daughter  
We're all someone's son  
[we *will* learn to love our neighbour as ourselves, when our neighbours are our sons and daughters, and not those Romans!]  
How long can we look at each other  
Down the barrel of a gun?  
[we *will* beat our swords in to ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks, because we won’t need them anymore once the Romans are out of here!]

**You** are the voice,  
[and we will find our voice, and use it]

...

We're not gonna sit in silence  
We're not gonna live with fear  
[we've found the Truth and the Truth will set us free!]

...

This time, we know we all can stand together  
With the power to be powerful  
Believing we can make it better  
[because the Son of David has finally come and we will *finally* become masters in our own house!]

...”

The crowd outside the walls is definitely jubilant! They are absolutely pumped up! They are chomping at the bit to get to the dénouement of Jesus' ministry. Because this isn't just Jesus' moment, it's *their* moment.

**They** are the ones who will benefit from the freedom to come. **They** are the ones who will be saved. They know how this king on a donkey is prophesied by Zechariah : “... his dominion shall be from sea to sea; ... I will set your captives free ... I declare that I will restore to you double ... I will ... wield you like a warrior's sword ...”

So of course they're euphoric.

But the crowds inside the walls are a little less so – they're confused about Him, asking “who is this man?” They're not yet caught up in the energy of the crowd outside the wall, but they're curious. But, who wouldn't be curious, with all the noise and bustle of this entry to the city? All these people lining the way into the city singing “Hosa-a-a-a-a-na, Hosa-a-a-a-a-na” (to the tune of “You're the Voice”)?

There's a power in this kind of jubilation. It can carry you along with it. You can get pulled in to the emotion and the energy, almost against your will.

Crowds are strange things. They are made up of individuals, but they sometimes behave as though they are of one mind, as though they're one entity. We sometimes speak of a “mob mentality” - that odd kind of mind-set that dominates when large numbers of people start to feed on each others' energy and behave in ways they might not behave otherwise.

We see it all the time at sporting events when the emotions of the individuals become, in some strange way, *the* emotion of the crowd. When someone scores a goal and the crowd (well, half of the crowd anyway) rises as one and lets out a spontaneous cheer. We see it at political rallies when the participants are “pumped up” to motivate them to get out and get the vote. We see it in certain kinds of religious services where the atmosphere *breathes* ecstasy.

Of course, when we speak of a “mob mentality” we need to acknowledge that there’s an important distinction between a “crowd” and a “mob”. The participants may be the same, but when the group is engaged in some positive activity – a sporting event, a rally, a street party, a parade, a search party – we don’t typically think of them as a mob. We *might* think of them as a crowd, depending on the situation, or we might think of them as a ‘throng’ of people, or some other descriptive that has a fairly neutral or even positive nuance.

But when the group – again, we may be talking about exactly the same people – are engaged in some negative activity – a riot, a hate rally, a looting spree, a rampage, a lynching – we’re more likely to typically think of them as a mob. The negative connotations are even more pronounced when we refer to organised crime syndicates : the Mob, capital M.

But I think the psychology of the group dynamic is essentially the same :

- people gather together for a purpose.
- they expect to be in the company of people of like mind.
- they have their own set of expectations with regard to their purpose for being there, but they look for confirmation of those expectations, and behavioural cues from the other participants in the crowd.
- And as the energy level increases;
- as the euphoria or anger spreads;
- as the inhibitions of the individuals are lessened, the crowd begins to take on a shared experience of emotion;

and in the hands of a skillful leader, that energy can be channelled very effectively. But, as I implied earlier, crowds can be very fickle things.

The choice of 'You're the Voice' at the beginning of the service wasn't made just because it has a very upbeat, positive kind of message. Again, I'm not suggesting anyone run out to watch it, but the film "Hot Rod" has a great scene at the one hour mark, where this song is used. The film itself is a juvenile comedy about a young man who wants to be a stuntman like his father. He's a bit of an underdog, not to say a "loser". None of his stunts ever quite work out, and he's a bit of a laughing stock in town. He likes to ride around in his moped, jumping over things.

At the point where this song is used, he's about to try jumping a motorbike over 15 buses and it's more or less a foregone conclusion that it will not end well.

On the morning of the jump, he leaves his house as this song starts to play in the background. Walking down the middle of the street, slow motion, he's joined by his brother who is clearly there to offer moral support, then his 2 closest friends. As they make their way to the fairground, they are slowly joined by other groups of people, until it's a huge crowd, people lining the streets singing,

"we're not gonna live in fear, wo-ho-oh-wo-oh-wo-oh-wo,"

and everyone is smiling, euphoric, in high spirits.

Until some guy in the crowd picks up a garbage can and tosses it through a store window. The euphoria quickly turns ugly, looting starts, cars are flipped over and set on fire, the riot police appear and start beating people over the head, women are screaming and chaos reigns.

I think it's a brilliantly done scene. A bit like a Montreal Canadiens victory parade.

It's funny, because it's true, as they say.

This isn't quite what happens with Jesus' triumphal entry, but it's close. Within a week, instead of a crowd of Hosanna singers, we have a mob of crucifixion criers. From a high point of euphoria, the mood in the city turns ugly, and Jesus is handed over to the authorities for his brutal execution.

We're obviously dealing here with 2 separate crowds. Two separate groups of people, separated by the better part of a week. Were some of the same people in both groups? I think probably so. Certainly the principal disciples of Jesus were present at both times, though *they* were certainly not crying out for Jesus' crucifixion.

I also take it more or less as a given that the second event, the appearance before Pilate and the call for Jesus' crucifixion, is the scene of a much larger crowd than the first event. Almost everyone in Jerusalem would have been present at the second event, including those who were present at Jesus' entry.

Everyone was there to celebrate the Passover, after all, and Pilate's tradition of freeing a prisoner at that time seems to have been a popular part of the celebrations. So we have this immense mass of people, primed for *something*.

We're told that the religious leaders stirred up the crowd and incited them to call for Jesus' crucifixion and to petition for Barabbas' release instead of Jesus. We're also told in Mark's Gospel that Barabbas was a rebel, and was in prison for participating in an insurrection in the city. This Barabbas was also guilty of killing someone during this insurrection. Here is a man of action, prepared to take up arms for the cause.

And I have to wonder : how many in the crowd legitimately felt that Barabbas, this man of action who had proved himself willing to fight for the liberation of Israel was a better choice for release than this Jesus?

How many of the people in the crowd, including those who may have been present on Palm Sunday, were disappointed in this Jesus as a Messiah? How many felt let down by this man who just didn't pan out as the saviour they were expecting?

Yes, after his entry to Jerusalem he chases the money-lenders out of the temple. That's pretty bold.

But then he goes on to suggest that they should "give to Caesar what is Caesar's" when asked about paying taxes.

While he's in Jerusalem, he never confronts the Romans, but he's unrelenting in his attacks on the Jewish religious leaders.

When his disciples point out how beautiful the temple buildings are, he doesn't take pride in this part of his heritage, he tells them "... there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down."

What kind of Messiah is this?

Just a couple of days before his crucifixion a woman anoints his head with expensive ointment, and we're told that his disciples were indignant at the waste. "Couldn't this ointment have been sold and the proceeds used to help the poor?" they ask. This is the point where Judas seems to make up his mind to betray Jesus, and he goes to the chief priests.

If one of the Twelve, his closest friends and most devoted followers, has now lost faith, how many more have given up on this wanna-be prophet from Galilee?

How close have *you* come to giving up on this prophet from Galilee?

How close have you come to feeling like this has all been a waste of time; a shallow experience of real life?

How close have you come to deciding that Sunday mornings could be better spent than gathering with a crowd of people just as flawed as you yourself?

I know I've come close from time to time.

I know I've sometimes wondered if I'm naïve, too idealistic, a bit of a Pollyanna, willingly blind to the harsh realities of this world.

I know my ideal of what the church – the Body of Christ – is, or should be, has sometimes taken a battering; that I've been disappointed; that I've been angry; hurt.

I can't ever imagine myself in a mob calling for Jesus' crucifixion. But I'm not much of a crowd kind of guy – I probably wouldn't have been there on Palm Sunday either.

No, I'm more likely to see myself off to one side, observing, measuring, trying to decide.

I find it fitting that Palm Sunday occurs within this period of Lent. Yes, it's a moment of joy and jubilation that's maybe a little out of step with the otherwise somber spirit of the season. It's not quite the jubilation of Easter, but it somewhat anticipates it.

But, on the other hand, juxtaposed to the grim events of the end of the week, it's a perfect opportunity to take stock;

to explore the depths of my own commitment to this king on a donkey;

to wonder how solid I can be as I resist the mob that wants to pull me in another direction;

the mob of patriotism; of consumerism; of religious intolerance; of intolerance of other sorts; the mob of indifference; and the mob of self-interest.

You may have different mobs trying to pull you in other directions.

I hope this crowd that gathers here of a Sunday morning can be one of those positive throngs that helps us keep our balance.

Yes, we have our own tendencies to lean perhaps a little too much this way, or that, but I hope being here Sunday morning helps all of us resist the other mobs that seek to draw us in.

And I hope and pray that we can resist becoming a mob ourselves – a mindless collection of bodies running in a particular direction because everyone else is running in that direction.

That's surely not what Jesus intended.