

Palm Sunday 'A royal reception'

Countdown to a royal wedding

Well, there are only twelve days to go. The nation is on countdown. Union Jacks are being purchased, champagne put on ice, commemorative china ordered, TV screens polished, train tickets booked, portaloos delivered to Green Park. Even the horses are being rehearsed. Twelve days until the red carpet is rolled out and William and Kate say 'I do'.

Whether you're a diehard royalist, or a disinterested republican, it's difficult to avoid the build up towards the Royal wedding. And it'd be even harder if we were in London.

I happened to be in central London the day before the wedding of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson, and the atmosphere was electric. Crowds were already bedding down in the Mall, staking their claim of pavement with cool boxes, deck chairs and sleeping bags, although I think the sleeping bags were optimistic.

The air was full of good humour and celebration. There were champagne corks popping, people singing and cheering. Even the City of Westminster street cleaning vehicles that sweep up the horse muck got applause. It was easy to get caught up in the mood of the occasion, the excitement, the sparkle in the air.

Pilgrims

Two thousand or so years ago there was a sparkle in the air, a sense of excitement, of celebration, as pilgrims made their way up to Jerusalem from Jericho. The long, hot, dusty and dry haul up starting well below sea level. The meeting once again with extended family and old friends, the feasting, the laughing, the singing of pilgrim songs, the anticipation of reaching the lush greenery of the mount of Olives, the view across to Jerusalem itself, and the festival awaiting them. It was a well worn path of celebration.

But this particular year there was something extra in the air. A fizz of expectation difficult to define. An electric atmosphere. An excitement beyond the norm. It hung around the teacher Jesus and his group of followers. Of course, wherever he went there was this electric feeling. Coming from Galilee they would have known that, heard the stories, maybe even seen him first hand. But now it was even more intense.

Suddenly two of his followers pushed their way through the jostling, singing, pilgrim crowd. They were leading a donkey. A donkey of all things! Jesus paused, spoke softly to his friends. They took off their cloaks and spread them on the donkey's back. As the pilgrims bunched up around him in a backlog of humanity, Jesus hitched up his robe and climbed astride the donkey. The friends began to shout and clap, "Hosanna! He saves! Hosanna!"

Getting caught up in the excitement, some of the pilgrims echoed the cry, “Hosanna! He saves! Hosanna!” and then one added a verse from the Psalms ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’. The shout was taken up by more and more. “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”

Jesus’ friends, knowing him to be a king, laid down their cloaks in the dust for him to pass over. And soon the way was strewn with cloaks. Others ripped leaves and branches from the roadside palms and waved them and laid them as a royal carpet for the king to travel on. Surely this King Jesus would change everything?

Many that day cheered because everyone else cheered. Many that day cut branches and waved them and threw them because it seemed the thing to do. Some even let their cloaks be trampled, caught up as they were in the excitement, the appearance of royalty, the certainty of Jesus’ friends, the determined look in the eye of the charismatic Jesus, his face set towards Jerusalem.

And then afterwards they wondered how it had all come about.

Disciples

The disciples on the other hand, knew how it had come about. It was planned. It was drama. It was another of these curious things that their master had decided to do. He had told them where the donkey would be. Told them what to say if they were challenged as they led the beast away. And it had all happened, of course, just as he had said.

There was a new intensity about Jesus that day. Something they couldn’t quite define, but it must be to do with this entering the city as a King. He seemed to be finally doing what they had hoped. What Peter had expressed a couple of chapters before when he said of Jesus “you are the Messiah”. And so they gave it their all. They defied ridicule and fetched the donkey. They threw down their cloaks. They led the crowds in shouting and waving. Once again they stepped out way beyond their comfort zones, their understanding, to do as Jesus required, to herald the coming King.

Little did they know what lay ahead. Jesus had spoken of it to them, but they didn’t have the ears to hear. Later they would find out what it really meant to be the Messiah, the king of the Jews. What it meant to be ushering in God’s kingdom. Later they would realise that it was a way of unbearable sacrifice and suffering. But for now they entered into the even whole heartedly.

Which are you?

But what about you? What about me? Where are we in this pilgrim crowd making its way to Jerusalem, towards the events of Holy Week, and ultimately Easter Day? Because we’ve all sung this morning, haven’t we, Make way, make way for Christ the King, and Hosanna in the

highest, and ride on ride on in majesty? We're travelling together as a group of people towards Easter. A group of pilgrims, if you like, from Wade Street Church. So what about us?

It could well be that you're accidentally caught up in the whole thing. That you find yourself here as a visitor or that you're vaguely interested. That you're an onlooker sensing something exciting is happening.

It could be that you're travelling a familiar path. You've been this way many times before. And every now and again the atmosphere gets so infectious that you can't help but shout out a hosanna or two. You might even risk getting your cloak dirty. But when the crowd drifts away then you do too.

It could be that you're one of the committed ones. A disciple in the thick of it helping to make it all happen. Leading the crowd, shouting hosanna, committing your cloak. Operating well outside of your comfort zone. But here you are feeling out of your comfort zone again. But even for you the events to come are too difficult to comprehend. It won't be long before you're standing at the foot of a cross in bewilderment, heading off to hide away.

Much will happen in the event of Holy Week before we meet again next Sunday morning in celebration of the risen Christ. There'll be anger in the temple, anointing at Bethany, footwashing and a meal in an upstairs room, betrayal, denial, anguish and weeping in the garden, a kangaroo court, and crucifixion.

None of it, if we take it seriously, allows us to be bystanders simply caught up in the crowd. All of it requires a response. What will yours be?

The words of Graham Kendrick seem fitting here:

This is our God, the servant King. He calls us now to follow him. To bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to the servant King.