

MATTHEW 21:1-11  
CELEBRATING TOGETHER!

Celebrations - days of unconfined joy and delight, days when we let our hair down, days when joy fills our hearts. We sing, we dance, we shout - well, it depends on the nature of the celebration which of these we do; we have a meal, a toast, we rejoice. Individuals celebrate, families celebrate, churches celebrate, communities celebrate and we all need these kinds of events in our lives individually or as a group. There are all kinds of reasons for celebration: we celebrate an achievement of some kind of success, graduation, winning a sporting event like a Commonwealth Games medal, or a league title, we have achieved something and it is quite right to celebrate that achievement. We celebrate milestones in family life: the birth of a child, an engagement, a wedding, a wedding anniversary - families need to have these kinds of celebrations, they bind families together more strongly. Churches celebrate: the anniversaries of congregations, their buildings, their ministries, celebrations that are particular to each place and each church family, in addition to the ongoing Christian celebrations of Easter, Christmas, and communion. Communities need celebrations: Juniper Green 300 was a great moment in time to celebrate 300 years of our community and the events that have taken place in the past, the people who have lived here and shaped the life of the place, reflecting who we are and what we hope for the future.

Here's a thing: we're not very good at celebrations! Is it something in our psyche, do you think? We celebrate, but... There's something at the back of our mind that wants to celebrate, but that wants to keep something in reserve, just in case it all goes pear-shaped. We don't give ourselves unreservedly to celebrate, just in case something goes wrong with it. There really is no reason for it, but that's us. We will celebrate, but we will not go overboard because that would be unseemly and we might be left with egg on our face later. The strange ways in which the human mind works! We need to celebrate. I was somewhere recently and someone said about the hymns we'd been singing "can we not sing some brighter hymns; life is grim enough without the hymns being grim as well!" We need celebrations and that's why I like some of the newer hymns that we sing, for example, because they allow us to celebrate in a stronger, more vibrant way, just by their very rhythm!

Palm Sunday is a celebration event in the gospel. Every aspect of Palm Sunday is about celebration; the dark clouds would come later, but there is nothing in Matthew's story to take away from the sheer joy in the hearts and minds of the people who watched Jesus ride into the city on that famous donkey. 500 years before, Zechariah had painted a picture for the people of the newly-resettled Jerusalem that one day their king would come to them in a particular way and with all kinds of qualities attached: "*Righteous...*" (*Zechariah 9:9*) It is pretty clear that Jesus was deliberately setting Himself to complete that picture and say to the crowd beginning to gather in the city for Passover "Here is your king!" Matthew doesn't miss the point; he even quotes Zechariah's promise. The king is coming to His city; He is coming to declare Himself King and the authorities get just a little itchy!

The crowd's reaction? It is all celebration. As we said earlier, everything the crowd does is an act of celebration of Jesus. They shout: the words come from Psalm 118, which is part of their history, part of their faith, words they know well, words they see as summing Jesus up. Hosanna: "O Lord save us" - that's what Jesus has come to do; He comes in the name of the Lord, God's appointed Messiah, the king come to bring the blessing of God to His people. They shout, they sing, there is sheer joy and exuberance. They wave palm branches, they lay down this impromptu red carpet -

actions of a crowd full of celebration delight at what they see around them. They are celebrating Jesus their King and nothing will stop them on Palm Sunday.

We've been looking at discipleship through the eyes of the disciples over the last few weeks and have told some of the stories of individuals who were part of Jesus' little group of twelve. They are here in this story too, but in several different ways, important ways. First of all, this is a shared group experience, something they were all part of together, something they will be able to share and talk about in the days, months, years to come. Communities need these shared experiences, times to celebrate together. These shared experiences join us together more strongly, that little bit of necessary extra glue that holds us together. It is so easy for us as Christians to become little islands, following Jesus in our own particular way, each one different, each one unique and we celebrate that uniqueness, but we can become islands floating off in all kinds of different directions. We need the shared experience of Church and worship to bind us together and weekly worship does that; big celebration events do it in a more powerful way. If these events don't happen naturally, we perhaps need to make them happen, to create these shared experiences and rejoice.

Here is a group with Jesus at the centre. The disciples are there on Palm Sunday, there as a group. Even those who are mentioned are anonymous. We'll come back to them in a moment. This is Jesus' day! All eyes are on Jesus and that's way it should be on Palm Sunday. The disciples were part of the larger crowd and their job on that day was to make sure that all eyes were on Jesus. We've no idea what they did; maybe they acted as cheerleaders; maybe it was the disciples who started the chanting of Hosanna; we have no idea, but their job on Palm Sunday is to make sure that everyone sees Jesus as King and that they stay in the background! Here is life in its right perspective: Jesus is at the centre of their group, and this was an experience that they would talk about for years to come, a shared experience that bound them more closely together. They were all there, the disciple group with Jesus at the centre.

We see two disciples who are mentioned – this is their job! "*As they...*" (*Matthew 21:1ff*) "*The disciples...*" (*Matthew 21:6*) This is a task that is just surrounded with questions. "Go to collect the donkey" - was this a prearranged thing? Had Jesus sent on ahead? "Untie it" - does it seem as if we're stealing it? How do we know we've got the right donkey? "Tell them, the Lord needs it" - is this the password, a secret code, agreed with the owner so that he knows who it is for? "He will send" - that sounds all right, but we just know that when we get there, we will find two donkeys tied up next to each other; what if we take the wrong one? But they go; they find the donkey; they bring it to Jesus and the rest is history! Two anonymous disciples, doing as Jesus told them, enabling this big celebration event to take place so that the crowd can celebrate Jesus; they are not even named!

There is something significant in all of this. In our discipleship, it is all about Jesus; it is never really about us. Our task, our mission as disciples is to let people see Jesus. If they see us along the way and appreciate us, that's fine; but our task is to let the world see Jesus so that people can learn to acknowledge that Jesus is King. When the story becomes about us, then we're got something wrong somewhere along the way. When we want to draw attention to ourselves and how good we are and that we're right all of time; or when we want to make sure that we get our own way and the church does things our way and our view prevails, then we've got things terribly wrong. When people are turned away from Jesus by the things we do and say then we have got things terribly wrong and need to repent of our faults and failures. We are a group together, with Jesus at the centre; it all about Jesus; we point people to

Jesus. He is the story! He is the King! He is the Saviour! Our job as disciples is to blend into the background and let Jesus take centre stage!

JH Jowett was a famous Victorian preacher and he was visiting a congregation to preach and prayer was offered for him; he called it "inspired"! "O Lord, we thank thee for our brother. Now blot him out! Reveal thy glory to us in such blazing splendour that he shall be forgotten." Jowett said that this man praying was absolutely right and "I trust that his prayer was answered." Discipleship is about working to make sure that Jesus is given a good name and that people believe Jesus! We make people think well of Jesus by being the right kind of people, being people who obey Jesus, who have His qualities in our hearts and lives, by telling others about Him when the opportunity arises. We do that together. In a society in which people are becoming more and more isolated, it matters that the church has this sense of 'together', community, family, where everyone is known by name, where everyone belongs, that we are a group of Christians together, with Jesus at the centre.

There's another crowd, another celebration to which all of our other celebrations look forward. John, there on Palm Sunday, sees a picture, is given a vision of Jesus as King; we read part of it in Revelation chapter 5. All the elements are there: there is singing, celebrating, joy and delight: "*worthy...*" (*Revelation 5:12*) and Jesus is at the centre, seated on the throne and all creation celebrates Jesus as king. John sees Jesus the King, a Lion-like king full of glory and honour; then a lamb-like king, looking as if He'd been killed "*standing in the centre of the throne.*" (*5:6*) This great celebration will take place in heaven when God's people will share His eternal glory and we will celebrate Jesus the King in a whole new, wonderful way. There will be singing, there will be joy and delight, there will be worship and service of a great King whose glory will be unbounded; Jesus is at the centre of everything and the voices of His people will sing together of His glory.

Celebration, singing, joy, delight, flag-waving, red-carpet walking - what a day Palm Sunday was! Jesus is King; Jesus is the centre of the story. I suppose this is about loyalty. The crowd declares "Jesus is our King; we want this man to be our King and we will be His loyal people". That loyalty and love was tested over the next week and by Friday another crowd was shouting something very different: "crucify Him." But later, the disciples together can look back to Palm Sunday and say "we were there together and we declared our loyalty to Jesus! He is our King! Let the whole world know!" Loyalty to Jesus is the first loyalty of our faith: our first loyalty is not to the church, not to a denomination, but to Jesus. He stands at the centre of everything; our mission as disciples is to let the world see Jesus; the story is not about us, but about Jesus, King, Lord, Saviour. That needs to be the loyalty of our hearts, a loyalty lived out in the kind of people we are, a loyalty that makes us take a back seat while people fall in love with Jesus. "*Hosanna...*" "*Blessed is...*"