

Person-Centred Worship

Matthew 21:1-11

This week Barack Obama and 18 other world leaders came to London. His 4.5 tonne Cadillac has eight-inch armour plating, a built in tear gas cannon, and emergency oxygen supply; he brought a 500-strong entourage, and Michelle, (if I may call her that in these days of chat-show informality), put her arm around the queen. The cost of security provided by us Brits alone was £7.5m. He went to see the queen in a motorcade of thirty vehicles. Now, the reasons for all this palava are easy to see, and I'm sure they were justifiable by a detailed risk-assessment.

Jesus also did a risk assessment when he came to Jerusalem: his disciples said, "You must be crazy, you'll be killed" and Jesus said, "that's exactly what my mission is – if only you'd understand." Jesus did a risk assessment; he wasn't planning to be killed by accident or the swift movement of an unknown assassin; but he still came into the city unprotected along the road, and for the final few miles, riding on a donkey.

The scene was one of unrelenting celebration. "Hosanna!" they cried, which means something like "Saviour!" Today, as we bring this series on the person-centred church to a close, I want to ask *What does Jesus' entry into Jerusalem tell us about worship?*

Humility

The first thing that strikes me is the humility with which Jesus comes to the holy city. It *is* a triumphal entry but he comes riding on a donkey, and he does so specifically to fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah,: **"Look, your king is coming to you humble."** Later we'll read the people shouted **"Hosanna to the Son of David."** Yet David's triumphal entry was an all-out military assault, followed by the slaughter of the city's inhabitants.

How does this humble approach affect our worship? It's saying to us "I'm at your level, and you can draw near to me." Now, that's not the last word about worshipping God, but it is one of the key messages of our Christian faith. The book of Revelation has some huge pictures of worship with myriads upon myriads worshipping, yet it's also the book in which John, the author, sees Jesus in a vision and falls at his feet as though dead only to have Jesus place his hand on his shoulder and lift him up.

This is what I call person-centred worship. It's worship that recognises persons, that makes space for persons, that demonstrates that what's important is the personal relationship. If you look at some of the big leaders of recent history you see Hitler filling the Nuremberg stadium with uniform chants of "Sieg heil"; you see Stalin flooding Red Square with tanks and other weaponry; you see any number of huge, carefully managed rallies and parades, but Jesus would prefer one worshipper with an honest heart than a thousand who merely chanted slogans.

So that's the first thing I notice about this triumphal entry which connects with the theme of how we worship as Christians. Jesus enabled worship to be person to person by getting down low so we could meet him person to person.

Acceptance

The second thing I notice is how Jesus accepts their acclamation. Jesus frequently accepted worship from people and it's one of the indications we have that he was aware of being the Son of God. Of course, it was quite frequent that someone should bow down to a general, a lord, or a king in the ancient world, but much less a way of showing respect to a Rabbi. In fact, if you *did* bow down to a Rabbi you'd be more likely to get a telling off – you clearly hadn't been listening to their teaching that only god should be worshipped. Yet as we read the gospels we find people falling at Jesus' feet with some regularity, and the word used is also typically used as meaning actual worship.

As Jesus came into Jerusalem, the crowd went before him, cutting down palm branches and spreading them out on the road. It was a blatant act of honouring. They shouted hosannas and blessings upon him. It didn't necessarily mean they thought he was divine – such a thing wouldn't have occurred to them. But they wanted so much to proclaim his worth – and that's what worship is. They wanted to shout out that he was the Saviour, the Healer, the Teacher, the Master, the Lord. And Jesus accepted their worship.

Worship can take so many different forms. I was talking with someone the other week and noticing how evangelical songs of worship have changed in style over the years. In the 1960s and 70s they tended to be modern hymns full of sound doctrine proclaiming truth about God and the gospel of Jesus. Sometimes it was thought these songs were too stuffy to carry the emotion of worship, so in the 1980s and 90s they tended to be much more personal and devotional. Many songwriters criticised for being "I" centred, but they were

helping people to be more personal and explicitly authentic in their confession. In our current decade, there's more emphasis on the transformational nature of worship – acknowledgement, in many songs, that the very act of singing them brings about a difference in our lives and situations.

All these differences, which reflect the culture and priorities of the time, are aspects of the giving and receiving, personal nature of worship. When Jesus receives our worship he doesn't do so as one who is distant – like Barack Obama or the Queen waving from the balcony of their palaces. He's down on our level, looking us in the eye, gratefully and happily acknowledging the gift; knowing the individual heart from which it's given; encouraging truthfulness and the exchange of love. Of course, you might well say, "Hold on a minute, I thought Jesus was supposed to be exalted to the highest place – he didn't stay humbled forever!" Yes, that's true, but as we say in the liturgy, "by his Spirit he is with us now."

Worship is a direct encounter with God, with Jesus, through the Holy Spirit. Anything less is mere repetition of words. But when those words – and actions – truly come from our hearts and are offered as gifts to God in person, by his Spirit he comes to us, person to person, personally to receive them. So the first thing I noticed about this passage was that in Jesus, God gets right down to our level so that we can worship him personally; the second thing I noticed was that in Jesus, and through the Holy Spirit, God receives our worship person to person.

Accompaniment

The third thing I notice in this passage is that worship occurs in the context of a journey – and Jesus knows the way.

Jesus is travelling to Jerusalem. If you read John's gospel (chapter 11) you'll see that his disciples didn't him to go because they were sure his enemies were going to stone him to death. But Jesus knew his mission; he understood his journey; he realised that he was there, as we all are, to do God's will and be led by God's Spirit.

As Jesus rides into the city he's deliberately acting out the prophecy of Zechariah, clearly positioning himself as Messiah. There were any number of messianic prophecies that *could* have been enacted; and many could have been interpreted in radically differing ways. Jesus places his own definition onto what the Messiah's supposed to be:

He is humble, and through that very humility challenging of every normal broken human way of handling power. He is focused, yet not on the destruction of those who would be his enemies, but rather upon an act which will open up the chance for them to be won by love. The time has come, yet victory won't be achieved through the exercise of conventional might, but rather through the gift of self-offering.

This is Jesus' journey, but there are also our journeys – as individuals, as families, as friends, as a church. Worshipping Jesus means placing our lives into the hands of the one who knows where he's going and actually who knows where we are going. Once again, it's *personal* act, a *personal* entrusting. But Jesus is used to journeying and as we worship him we're saying "I want to join you on your journey, and for you to join me on my journey as it becomes yours." It's about accompaniment.

At home I have a couple of books called "early Christian worship". I remember buying them thinking that they'd be all about songs and gifts of the Spirit and stuff like that, only to be rather confused that they both focused on the rituals of baptism and holy communion. But of course these sacraments are absolutely part of our worship. In baptism we entrust our lives to the life of Christ. That's what it means to go under the water – it doesn't actually matter how *much* water, whether it's a pot, a pool or an ocean. What counts is the position of the water – that we place ourselves *under* it. In placing ourselves under the water we're placing our life-journeys in Jesus' hands. And in the baptism of children, as parents we're entrusting *them* and their journeys to Jesus.

And in communion, we eat the bread and drink the wine, which symbolises our voluntary union with Jesus – taking Jesus on board, if you like, except that it's more than that. Rather than simply saying, "Jesus I want you to be in my body", we're actually saying "Jesus, I want *me* to be incorporate in *your* body." Again, it's an act of entrusting – entrusting ourselves and our life-journeys to Jesus and the life-journey he desires for us. It's saying "Jesus, I want to live for you, to honour you, to let it be known that you are worthy of my whole life and nothing less."

We can do that because in Jesus' outlook, worship is person-centred. It's all about people and our lives with him. As I was preparing this sermon, my mind kept on flashing back to those images of Hitler at the Nuremberg rallies. He received the worship of thousands in those arenas but he didn't care what happened to any of them, and millions of people died as a result of his megalomania.

But Jesus says to each of us, “don’t you know? The hairs on your head are numbered by God. He sees the fall of a sparrow, and aren’t you worth much more than the sparrows?” I don’t believe our lives are pre-ordained, but I do believe that Jesus walks with us and he wants us to walk with him. That’s what worship is all about; that’s why worship is rightly called “person-centred”; and that’s why today I’d like to invite you afresh to worship Jesus – entrusting your life to him, with all its uncertainties and unknowns; entrusting your family to him, your friends to him, your work to him, your church to him, your heart to him.