



Vision #11

Palm Sunday

w/c 24 March 2024

"No pain, no palm; no thorns, no throne; no gall, no glory; no cross, no crown."
(William Penn)

Read Mark 11:1–11

The crowds!! It would be as though the Glastonbury Festival relocated to Vivary Park – and the racecourse and everything in between! And for Jerusalem at Passover, the small matter perhaps of a couple of hundred thousand lambs and the like intended for sacrifice. Matthew's account is clearer on some of the detail of Jesus entry to the city: it was *"a very large crowd"* (21:8) and *"the whole city was stirred"* (21:10). Luke adds a poignant coda to his account of Palm Sunday (Luke 19:41). As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, he looks at the city and weeps over it. What should we show similar concern for across our world today?

Though perhaps not aiming for a direct reenactment, accounts of this episode remind us of our need for the 'lost in it all' crowd experience. Such times though are meant to be mountain peaks encountered occasionally. Living on nothing else might be a little like trying to exist on a diet of chocolate mousse.

Many writers have noted the need we have for experiencing groups of various sizes. As well as those of personal acquaintance, those of a *cell* (something like the group you're in now), a *congregation* (hopefully self-evident), and the crowd-like *celebration* of days like the first Palm Sunday are particularly important. How do we establish these concentric circles of relationship and experience that can build and help us? Throughout the gospels we find Jesus engaged with his followers in many different ways:

John – probably his cousin – is described as the *"disciple whom Jesus loved"*. We all need a best friend.

John, with James and Peter then seem to have formed an inner core of the twelve. Modern writers put the upper bound of such a close friendship-group as perhaps five for us today.

The Twelve are clearly the best-known – any bigger and the group becomes a meeting. We often find groups around this size across history and in life today.

Often though there must have been more – see Luke 8:13 and 10:1 for example. The 72 might have been the upper limit, but groups of around 50 seem to form an active network for many people.

Beyond this, recent research indicates that, by and large, the size of that group which we can truly say we know, our personal network, is limited to around 150. This helps explain how, as a church grows, it can start to feel uncomfortable as its size passes this limit and members can no longer know everyone else. What steps might we take to allow St James to grow beyond this point?

So we return to the crowd, something we often meet through the gospels – Matthew uses the term no less than 41 times. As well as the numbers on Palm Sunday, we should particularly recall the 500 who Paul notes (1 Cor 15:6) were witnesses of the resurrection. Our difficulty may though be finding somewhere that allows us to transcend the normal. It's the stuff of rock concerts or football matches. Can we find it in church?

Read Philippians 2:5–11

From Paul's letter it appears that the church in Phillipi may not have been the happiest of places – why else does he need to warn them off *"selfish ambition and vain conceit"* (ch2v3). It is in this context that he perhaps reached for a well-known text to reinforce his exhortation for a Christ-like attitude to each other – verse five is plural after all. How can we build on the words here to put verse four into practice?

"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it."
(Nelson Mandela)