Palm Sunday 2015

John 12:12-16

St Francis 29th March 2015 10am

We had a great time at the 10th anniversary service of the floating shelter last Sunday afternoon and St Francis was quite prominent with Ada, Holly and Bola giving a tribute to our shelter here, and I was called upon to bring a message. I reckon there must have been 200 people, a lot more than I expected. At the beginning the name of each church was called out and we were invited to cheer loudly for our one. St Francis was suitably rowdy! Reuben Martin the local pastor had jokingly said that names would be taken of those who were absent. When it came to Holy Innocents, Norwood, there was a deafening silence. We looked over to John Broom, the chairman, and there he was scribbling away! So, well done St Francis.

The people in our reading cheered loudly for another *one* – for Jesus as he entered into Jerusalem, atop a donkey, not a sign of poverty but a sign of a mighty ruler coming in peace. In those days riding on a horse represented aggression, whereas a donkey represented peace. The crowd cheered wildly, waved palm branches, threw their coats on the floor and shouted Hosanna. Why did they do this?

Partly it was because Jesus was popular.

Have you ever been popular?

The peak of my popularity was when I was in my early thirties and one Friday I actually had three groups of friends who wanted me to go out with them. It was wonderful and horrible at the same time because I didn’t know what to do! Anyway it didn’t last. The next week it was back to one invite! The problem is that you have to choose and they have to choose. You can’t be all things to all people all the time. In fact the friends I stuck with were the friends I still see now.

Jesus wasn’t looking for popularity but his actions gradually aroused a great deal of interest. And one action in particular – that was the healing of Lazarus.

Let’s recap a little.

Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha were a close knit family and great friends and supporters of Jesus. But in John 11 we hear how Lazarus had fallen ill and was dying. Jesus was called but somehow didn’t make it in time and so Lazarus had died and was buried in a tomb. Martha and Mary were distraught and angry, and when Jesus arrived he was deeply moved (the shortest verse in the Bible – “Jesus wept”). So immediately Jesus goes to the tomb where Lazarus was buried and asks for the stone to be taken away. Despite their objection about the smell, he calls Lazarus out from the tomb in a loud voice, and …

**44**The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face.

A large crowd of mourners had been following them and had witnessed this extraordinary event. The effect must have been electric. Whatever reputation Jesus had acquired up to now for his other miracles such as healings or water into wine, this must have taken it to a whole new level! The Jesus-fever would quickly have become a frenzy.

Shortly after this, in chapter 12 of John, Jesus is back with his favourite people having a meal: Mary, Martha and the newly resurrected Lazarus. They were the people he chose to spend time with. But it doesn’t take long before they are interrupted, as the woman comes to anoint Jesus feet. A little later it says in verse 9, the crowds hungry for more spectacle are circling,

**9**… a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

The chief priests were deeply scared and added to their plans to kill Jesus, a plot to kill Lazarus as well.

But the momentum was unstoppable such that when Jesus chose to make his entrance to Jerusalem, the events we celebrate today were the result. The crowds were caught up in a euphoria of celebrity, of healing, of salvation and of *resurrection*. They knew a man, Lazarus, had been resurrected before their very eyes!

Even the palm branches spoke of resurrection. Each of you has a palm cross. Its modern name is interesting: phoenix dactylifera. What does phoenix remind you of – the bird that rose from the ashes. Even in ancient times the date palm was referred to as the phoenix tree because of its ability to grow new foliage even after being burnt.

Later on it was used by early Christians as a symbol of resurrection and healing.

You are holding a symbol of resurrection and healing in your palms.

And it’s still as relevant today!

Caroline Stembridge testimony of healing. Jimmy?

But even with an event as dramatic as resurrection, sadly the nature of celebrity is that it eventually eats up the object of its adulation.

So it was with Jesus. The crowds adored him when they felt there was something exciting and something in it for them. But a week later they were shouting out “Crucify him” instead of Hallelujah.

Who actually stood by him? Who was there at the end? We don’t know for sure, yet church tradition states that Mary and Martha stood by Jesus till the very end and even became leaders of the church in their own right. According to Orthodox tradition, the *healed* Lazarus became a Bishop. And we know his mother Mary, and the *restored* Mary Magdalene, the disciple John also stood by at the cross.

The rest of his followers melted away. The party was over. Who wanted to follow a loser? Who wanted to follow someone who was no longer powerful, someone who had no more rabbits to pull out of the hat? Apparently, only the people who really, truly loved him and were truly grateful to him.

I think the church is in the same position today. Christianity in this country is no longer popular, it’s not very cool, it is largely ignored by the media.

It doesn’t matter because God is still doing his stuff! He still healing people, like he did Lazarus. And God is still calling people to follow Him: not to follow a crowd following Him, but to simply follow him. To follow Him and ignore all other offers and distractions. To follow Him and to stand by Him. To love Him as He loves us.

This coming week is the holiest time of year as Christians. What are you going to do with your time? Catch on shopping or TV? Or devote some of your time to Jesus.

Our services are listed in the notice sheet – Monday to Thursday at 8pm, the Good Friday. Michelle is doing breakfast at 8.30am then we have the joint service at 10am, Walk of Witness, then some are going to Trafalgar Square to watch a re-enactment of the passion. Then, of course Easter Sunday.

We are here because we are grateful to God. We’ve received his forgiveness, his healing and his restoration. That’s why we will always stand by him. Amen.