

Sermon for Palm Sunday

The Bishop of Manchester

In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, and the crowds come out and greet him.

Do you remember crowds? It may be only a matter of weeks, but it seems a long time ago now since we were last able to gather together in churches, at sporting events, or in cinemas, clubs and theatres. Some of my most formative memories of growing up are of being part of a crowd, like watching my birthplace's non-league football club, Mossley, in a Wembley Cup Final. We lost. More recently, I took strength and courage from the packed cathedral that greeted me when I came home **to Manchester in 2013 to take up the role as its bishop.**

Yet if I had to select one crowd, the crowd I have needed most to be part of, that would be the crowd that I addressed in a packed Manchester city centre three years ago. On a warm spring evening, we gathered in thousands to share our grief and commit ourselves to love one another. We did so, drawn together by a terrorist attack the previous night, that had snatched 22 lives from our midst and maimed hundreds more. That crowd, witnessed by so many on TV across the world, changed the way in which cities and nations respond to atrocities, and changed it for the better.

Crowds matter. And in this time of social, or more accurately physical, distancing, the ways in which we can come together matter even more. It wasn't only our health workers who took strength from that recent evening when so many emerged from their front doors to offer a round of applause. Each might only have been able to see or hear at most a handful of others, but everyone knew that this was something huge - a mighty crowd. Some of our present crowds are even more invisible. Few who saw it will not forget the image of Pope Francis praying alone on a dais in the centre of St Peter's Square in Rome. No other human figure is visible, and yet he was as much at the centre of a crowd as if the square had been as full as it would be in normal times.

Crowds don't have to be in the same place to connect. In this last couple of weeks, many of us have learned how to be part of a church congregation over the internet. I am deeply aware of how much it means to many Christians to see the face of a known priest or minister leading them in their prayers, preaching a sermon in familiar tones. And even whilst we are not all able to partake physically of Holy Communion, we can receive the spiritual benefits from watching on-line. For those without IT devices, the daily and weekly services on radio and TV are providing strength and sustenance. Yes, we can pray and read our bibles individually, but there is something extra about knowing we are among many.

We are discovering that crowds don't even need to gather at the same time. I hope that you followed how to make a palm cross, if I can do it, it requires no special dexterity or skill. Make a cross, even if it has to be as simple as two strips of paper stuck together at right angles. Put it in your window whenever you have the time to do it. And know that you are part of a mighty company of fellow Christians, as we begin the commemoration of Holy Week and Easter together.

The largest crowd that the Bible tells us Jesus addressed was no greater than a few thousand people. Not bad for days when each would have had to listen individually to his voice. And yet those who heard passed on the message to others. Evangelists set down his words in their gospels, to form what became known as the Sermon on the Mount. We are not told how many lined the

streets of Jerusalem, waving palm branches that Sunday morning, but when we hear or read the account of that day, as we have done in this act of worship, we are part of that selfsame crowd. Separated by thousands of miles and almost 20 centuries, but one in crying "Hosanna".

Crowds, visible or virtual, are made of human beings, and are subject to the faults and weaknesses of humanity. From the crowds pictured at Hitler's rallies, to the crowd that shouted for Jesus to be crucified on Good Friday, they can all too easily be manipulated by dark forces. There may be times when we have to stand apart from the crowd, or to criticise its actions. Mob rule is not good rule. Yet the desire, and need, to gather is part of our God given humanity. Not to be avoided, but to be done well. Even if at present that means done at a distance.

One dark, wet and cold winter's night, sometime around 1982, I had opened up the church I was helping at during my studying days, so that, in the absence of our vicar, a visiting priest could lead our service of Holy Communion. We usually had a handful turn up, but that night, nobody came. I was deeply apologetic at having dragged him across Birmingham for a wasted journey. I suggested it might be best to cancel so he could go home out of the bad weather. He insisted we carry on. "Never forget, David", he said. "It isn't just you and me at the Lord's Table tonight. We are surrounded by angels, archangels and the whole company of heaven". And so we were. And so are each of us now, wherever we are today, whenever we are watching or listening to this service. Hosanna to the King of Kings.

Amen.