5th April: Palm Sunday : Mark 11:1––11, 14:1––15:47

Professor Martyn Percy

The Expository Times 2009 120: 284
DOI: 10.1177/0014524608101926

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES
Volume 120 Number 6 Pages 284–285

(Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington DC)
DOI: 10.1177/0014524608101926
http://EXT.sagepub.com

5th April: Palm Sunday

Mark 11:1–11, 14:1–15:47

REV CANON PROFESSOR MARTYN PERCY
Principal, Ripon College Cuddesdon and the Oxford Ministry Course

Crowds can be conservative, unpredictable and fickle. They can move from a frantic frenzy to a mood of relative quiet. They can be whipped up into a vicious mob or into an adoring assembly. Or they can turn the tables, and be quite unmoved. Jesus spent quite a bit of time with crowds, and one senses that he knew how to work an audience. He used humour, pathos, irony and appeal in his rhetoric. He was persuasive. His stories hushed people by the hundreds; his sayings hit home, striking at both the head and the heart. In Jesus, we see wisdom, oratory, empathy, passion and coolness all combined.

Traditionally, Palm Sunday marks the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. He is feted and celebrated by the crowds, who cut down palms from the trees, and lay their clothes across the road and he rides through on his donkey. The gospels record the event, telling us that the crowds lining the street to see the famous Galilean prophet and healer, cried 'Hosanna in highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'. The event must have made quite an impact, and would not have gone unnoticed by the authorities.

And yet crowds can be fickle, can they not? The same people who cry 'Blessed is the King' on Sunday need only a few days to change their verdict. 'Crucify him!' is the cry of Friday. The paradox of Holy Week is that Jesus makes that all too modern journey – from hero to zero in a matter of days. The crowds that proclaim will soon declaim – and will eventually desert. The journey that begins today ends not in triumph, but in tragedy. The one who is fêted will soon be failed; he who is lifted up will shortly be struck down – and then lifted up for derision and scorn.

All over our land today, churches will read the passion narratives, and hear again the familiar words that take us through Holy Week. It is the role of the crowds, however, that is especially striking. For the function and behaviour of crowds is an important key to understanding what goes on during Palm Sunday, and throughout Holy Week. For the crowds are hardly passive. They are, rather, active agents in the drama of Holy Week, playing a full part in the ebb of flow of Jesus' popularity – and eventual crucifixion. Somewhere in their enthusiasm, and eventually in their scorn, is the whole compass and range of human reaction to Jesus' kingship. One minute he is the answer – a kind of panacea for Palestine. Next, he is disowned, rebuked and despised – the very embodiment of the suffering servant foretold by Isaiah.

Some of the most influential work in the study of crowds was undertaken by Serge Moscovici, who from a sociological and psychological perspective, explored how crowds easily swing from being radical to conservative; and in the process, make the move from praise to outright condemnation. In his work *The Age of the Crowd* (1985), Moscovici examined the social and psychological sources of crowd behaviour; he is alive to the issues of power, charisma and suggestion, of the balance between leaders of various types and those who are led, and the paradoxes that crowds present us with.

For Moscovici, crowds are not just passive groups of people – they are also pro-active. They don't just watch; they also make their own action. Neatly subverting the Marxist slogan 'religion is the opium of the people', Moscovici tells us that 'communication is the Valium of the people'. Communication is seen as a social process, a form of ideology in which the ability to dialogue has broken down, and has collapsed into monologue. Communication to the crowd is stimulation, in which the message is the medium.

The etymology of the word 'religion', at its lowest determinate, simply means 'to bind'. This 'binding' comes about through conflations of 'ordinary' and 'transcendent' qualities such as power, charisma, order and hope. This reaches its ultimate context in the form of celebration, whether it is of a religious nature, or simply a famous win in a local derby at football or rugby. Followers become transformed into 'fans' – an abbreviation of our word 'fanatic' – a term often associated with religious enthusiasts, and a recognition of some of the psychological similarities between the two.

And this is the Palm Sunday problem, in a nutshell. It is the very behaviour of the crowd that is worrying from the outset. There is less discernment and more hysteria. Jesus moves from a position where he has gained little recognition to one in which he is crowned as 'the people's king'. Holy Week begins here, because it is obvious that those who set him up will eventually do him down. That is how crowds work. As any politician, celebrity or sports star will testify. The crowd, bound together in adulation, can quickly turn nasty – especially if you don't deliver the goods. So Palm Sunday prepares the ground for Holy Week. The hot passion of Peter's rhetoric, the bathetic sentiments of the crowd and the pledges of the disciples – it will all be for nothing. Words will fail. In then end, the thousands of followers will be reduced to just a few, standing in silence, keeping their distance, on a cold dark Friday. How the mighty are fallen.

GOD, THE WORLD AND THE CHURCH

Geoffrey Wainwright, *Embracing Purpose: Essays on God, the World and the Church* (London: Epworth, £19.99. pp. 370. ISBN 978–0–7162–0632–3).

This book by Geoffrey Wainwright, the Cashman Professor of Systematic Theology at Duke University Divinity School, may come as something of a shock to those who regard Duke Divinity School as the bastion of the Hauerwasians, where the works of John Howard Yoder form a kind of secondary canon. There are no references here to Yoder, or Hauerwas, or even to radical orthodoxy. Instead the major dialogue partners are modern giants of the *oikumene* like Lesslie Newbigin, the Fathers of the early Church, and the founding fathers of modern ecumenism.

Embracing Purpose is a selection of essays and lectures which Wainwright has produced in recent years. With his compelling linkage of worship, ethics and systematic theology in *Doxology: Doctrine and Life* (1980), Wainwright laid down a path on which many were to follow, not least the Hauerwasians. But there was seldom adequate acknowledgement given to Wainwright, the trailblazer.

Wainwright's years in Africa gave him a deep commitment to mission, and for several decades he was a prominent and influential figure in the ecumenical movement, especially in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

All this, and more, is reflected in this fascinating and important collection of essays. Picking gems at random one might come upon a brilliant exposition of Psalm 33, or his sympathetic and perceptive engagement with missionary theology in dialogue with Lesslie Newbigin, or his exploration of convergences and continuing disagreements in recent ecumenical theology. Perhaps Wainwright does not recognize or respond to the fact that in recent years the wind has apparently gone out of the sails of the good ship *oikumene*. But one could hardly hope for a better guide to the development of ecumenical theology in the twentieth century.

Wainwright and Hauerwas are in fact complementary rather than in conflict. For Hauerwas and Yoder the Church almost always means the congregation; for Wainwright it is the *Una Sancta*. Both, surely, are necessary dimensions of the Church of Jesus Christ. Wainwright's new book is not always an easy read, but it deserves to be widely studied and reflected on for the sake of its manifold and significant insights.

DUNCAN B. FORRESTER
School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh