

## ROLLER COASTER LIFE

→ When I was a child, the village that I grew up in, in common with many other local villages and towns, held an annual carnival in the summer. So as a very young child, I would often find myself in some costume or other on the back of a farm trailer that had been suitably decorated for the occasion! Then as a teenager, when our own local village carnival had ceased to exist, as a family, we would often find ourselves on a few Saturday evenings in the winter, attending carnivals in the local towns. We joined thousands of other people who lined the streets to watch yet more people that we knew dressed up in ridiculous costumes on the back of trailers and lorries as they processed through the streets to the accompaniment of brass bands and majorette troupes! And of course, the highlight of the evening was always the fish and chips that we would have on the way home!

.....On those carnival nights we would arrive in the town long before the procession was due to start in our efforts to get a good viewing point and of course, many others would have done the same. There was the usual vying for the best spots and then the growing impatience as we waited for the spectacle to begin.

→What we have in our Matthew passage today is a procession. There aren't any brass bands or groups of majorettes; but there is plenty of singing and shouts from the crowd. There may not be any beautiful floats, but there are coats and palm branches laid out on the ground. And of course, we have the "man of the moment", the celebrity, not arriving in limousine or helicopter, but riding on a donkey.

.....This story is overflowing with symbolism and meaning that could easily be missed by those of us who hear about this parade today, 2000 years after the event, but which would have been very apparent to those who were present at the time. For example the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah start to be fulfilled when Jesus asks for the young donkey to be brought to him. Zechariah had said, "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." So, Jesus, arriving in the way that he did would have sent the message that the Son of David has arrived – the long awaited King is now leading the procession.

.....But riding on a donkey had other significance too. I don't know what image you have in your mind when you think of donkeys – perhaps it the donkeys on the beach at your favourite seaside resort, or the donkeys in the donkey sanctuary where they are not only cared for well but used to aid the wellbeing of us humans too, or perhaps you think of Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh! For the people lining the streets when Jesus rode into town donkeys carried a special meaning. Kings rode horses in times of war, but in times of peace they rode donkeys. So, Matthew and the other gospel writers are making a statement about the kind of King Jesus is and if the people had really been paying attention that day, they would perhaps have realised that this King Jesus was going to be very different to the one that they were expecting.

.....But I'm guessing not many people were thinking about that on Palm Sunday. No one is questioning that Jesus will conquer the Romans and set the Jews free from the oppression that they are suffering. Of course he will! See what he's been

doing already! Healing lepers, making blind people see, enabling lame people to walk again. He's even gone so far as to forgive sins and confront the Pharisees. This is the kind of Messiah the people have been waiting for and they're just waiting for him to give it to the Romans once and for all. How ironic that the cries of the crowd on Palm Sunday were pretty much the equivalent of "Long live the King!" when you consider all that was going to unfold in the week that followed.

→ So people are so impressed and taken with Jesus that he gets what we might describe as the red-carpet treatment as he makes his way into the city of Jerusalem. What a great day for him! What a great day for the crowds! What could possibly go wrong now?

.....Ever have days like that? When you feel on top of the world? When you feel as if you could conquer anything? When everything just seems to be going your way? Days like that are wonderful aren't they, but they are also generally few and far between! The followers of Jesus were going to move from triumph to tragedy, from the red carpet experience to the cross in just a few days, and our lives can turn around that quickly too. Days that start out well can just as easily end badly and I'm guessing that most of us know what that feels like. Everything can change as the result of a conversation or a message or a meeting.

.....And when life takes a difficult turn, we perhaps wonder why? Why me? Why now? Why is my parade being rained on? One of my clergy colleagues once told a story of visiting one of his members who was in his eighties and in hospital. During the hospital visit the man remarked that this was the first time in all his life that he had ever been in hospital. As my colleague reflected back what a blessing that must have been, the elderly gentleman replied by saying how stunned he was to find himself in hospital now. "I knew it would happen someday," he said. "I just didn't think it would happen this soon!"

→ I imagine we can all relate to the disappointment of that man in his hospital bed, but why do we think that way? Why do we come to expect that life is always going to be good or easy or pain free and that difficult times are the exception to the rule? In John's gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying, "In this world you will have trouble." Not "you may have trouble" and not even "every once in a while something not so good might just happen!" No! He says, "You will have trouble."

.....The truth that we can learn from scripture; the truth that we can glean from Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem is that we need to savour every moment of life, because actually the red carpet days are few and far between. Many dream of a perfectly normal life, but what does a perfectly normal life look like? None of our lives are perfect or normal and that shouldn't really surprise us in the light of Jesus' words to his followers. They were certainly surprised when he didn't turn out to be the king they wanted him to be. So much so that their cries of "Hosanna, long live the King!" quickly turned to crucify him! And the crown they were ready to place on his head became a crown of thorns.

.....But how do we react when the good times cease? What do we do when the red carpet isn't rolled out for us anymore? How do we respond when the lovely life that we long for just isn't happening? The crowds turned their back on Jesus. The Pharisees tried to silence the truth that Jesus was proclaiming. But what about us?

What do we do when life takes a turn for the worse and things happen that we don't think we deserve?

.....The renowned preacher and teacher Fred Craddock says that if we are going to stick with Jesus beyond Palm Sunday, we have to change from thinking that "Wherever the Messiah is there is no misery" to thinking, "wherever there is misery, there is the Messiah." We have to seek to understand that Jesus doesn't get us out of difficulty but uses us in places of great need where we can witness to God's power in this world.

→ The way we are and the witness we give when life is tough can be life changing for us and for others. It's generally easy to smile when life is good and the sun is shining on us. It's easy to praise God when all is going well and when our fears and worries seem small and manageable. But can we still praise God when the cheering crowd changes to an angry mob? Can we still shout "Hosanna" when pain or grief or fear of the future, threaten to overwhelm us? Can we still speak Jesus' name when it might be easier or safer to just stay quiet? Sometimes life can turn from good to bad so quickly that our faith is called into question and we're not even sure that God is around at all let alone on our side in those moments.

..... If you've felt that way, or if you feel that way now, let's go back to that quote of Jesus in John's gospel. "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." If we have the courage to speak Jesus' name, even in the middle of the most difficult moments of our lives, then we are saying something very powerful about the power of God in our lives. If we only ever had good days, we'd never have anything to say about how God provides for, supports us and equips us for the difficult times. We'd never be able to tell others about how Jesus accompanied us through the dark valleys and the difficult moments.

→ The crowd in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday thought they knew who Jesus was. But he was so much more than that. This coming week we have an opportunity to walk with him through his arrest, his trial, his betrayal and his crucifixion and if we do that, we say something about our belief and our faith that he will walk with us through our own difficulties and betrayals. But in order to see and experience that kind of presence and power in our lives, we can't just walk away when the carnival is over, when the red carpet is rolled up. We have to stick with Jesus through it all.

.....But of course, Palm Sunday is not the end of the story. And neither does it end on Maundy Thursday, or even on Good Friday. If we accept Jesus as a humble and lowly king who doesn't rescue us from trouble but who walks with us through it then there's so much for us to discover and ultimately to celebrate. So, stick with Jesus through this coming week; experience the poignancy of Maundy Thursday, join in the agonising prayer of Good Friday, stagger with Jesus to Golgotha, let your heart be sealed in that dark tomb through the silence and solitude of Saturday and then, and perhaps only then, will you truly be ready to celebrate all that Easter Day is all about. That's when the real rejoicing begins. There may not be palm branches or hosannas, but there will be a Messiah who is alive, a King who has given his all for us, a Saviour who will journey with us through all the good times and the bad times because he's travelled this way before. What more could we ask? Who else could we trust? Who else deserves our praise on this Palm Sunday?