

PALM SUNDAY REFLECTION 2020

Introduction

Words are very powerful. We know that by changing our vocabulary we can change our perception of reality. To call someone a victim, for example, makes them sound weak, powerless, helpless. To call them a survivor on the other hand shows respect for their resilience, courage and strength.

Who decreed that a collection of ants, butterflies or rats should be a swarm; or that a group of meerkats, thieves or rioters should be called a mob? Of course, if we bump into a group of angels, they are a choir or if we are rugby fans, we call angels a band. Sailors make up a crew, and several directors, trustees or governors are a board.

Sometimes the use of collective nouns can make the same people appear sinister or wise or entertaining. What images are conjured in your minds when I to refer to a mob of students, a class of students, a troupe of students, or a swarm of students?

Dictators and demagogues have long known how to manipulate public opinion by – among other things – the use of collective nouns. George Orwell, if he has anything to teach us, teaches us that careful use of language is essential to freedom and truth. Take a group of journalists – are they free thinkers, reactionaries or revolutionaries? It all depends on which paper they work for and what assumptions you begin with!

THE PALM SUNDAY STORY

Ah yes, I didn't mention that today is Palm Sunday, the day that begin Holy Week in the Christian calendar. After the sombre worship of Lent, we usually enjoy any excuse to wave palm branches or just small palm crosses, and shout "Hosanna", especially if there are children in the service. Sadly, not this year!

Palm Sunday is a day of collective nouns. Whatever collective nouns we use will shape our understanding of what is going on. Truth, like beauty, is in the eye – or the words – of the beholder.

On Palm Sunday Jesus rode into Jerusalem. There are many groups, factions and parties involved in this tale. There are:

The 12 disciples,

The people who provided the donkey for Jesus to rise,

The Clergy,

The soldiers who accompanied Pontius Pilate,

The crowd who welcomed Jesus. The crowd who later turned against Jesus.

I wonder what collective noun you would give to each of these.

A. The Disciples of Jesus

The disciples of Jesus played a key role in preparing for and stewarding this triumphal entry, or demonstration if you prefer. Are they a flock, a congregation or a conspiracy? Are they to be pitied, feared or admired? Have they discovered a tremendous new revelation from God, or are they spitting in the eye of decency and order?

Just like Extinction Rebellion today, they will have sharply divided opinions. As for Jesus, was He mad, bad or God? If He was mad, how do we account for the wisdom of His teaching and the perception of His parables. If He was bad why was He moved with compassion time and time again? Why was He drawn into a healing ministry? But the claims He made, like "*I am the Resurrection and the life*" are not the sort of claims that a *good man* could possibly make if he were sane. But, if He were God, how can we make sense of that? Perhaps we can't. Perhaps that is why faith is required.

B. Jesus Helpers

There were the people in the village who made the donkey available (Matt 21:2). They seemed to be waiting for messengers to come and use the pass code "*The Lord needs it*" (NLT). As so often, our modern minds ask questions that the gospel writers never intended to answer – such as when was this code arranged, how and by whom?

So, these mystery men who were involved in the practical arrangements for Palm Sunday what should we call them? Were they followers of Jesus, supporters, well wishers or co-conspirators? The words we use to describe them

will ultimately affect how we understand the events that were about to take place.

What is clear, Palm Sunday would have been very different without the donkey!

C. The Clergy

John's Gospel rather unhelpfully refers to "the Jews", meaning the religious leaders of the day. Many have argued that this has had tragic consequences down through the ages and no right-thinking person today would wish to be associated with antisemitism. So, in this reflection I will use the term "clergy" loosely to include the religious leaders, priests, scholars pharisees and leaders of the synagogues. In doing so, I emphasise the point that the sins of those who reject Jesus in the gospels are very easily replicated by His own people today.

What was the final straw for those who sought opportunity to arrest Jesus? Was it the cleansing of the Temple, the raising of Lazarus or the moment at Caesarea Philippi when Peter made his great confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ? Whatever it was, how do we describe the clergy? Were they defenders of the purity of their religion, protectors of their own prestige and power, or guardians of public security in the circumstances of Roman occupation?

D. The soldiers

The gospels don't tell us this, but from other sources scholars tell us that whilst Jesus enters Jerusalem from the west, Herod Antipas was engaged in his annual procession from Caesarea Maratima into the Holy City from the other side, riding on a war horse and accompanied by Roman soldiers (see notes on Luke 19:28-48 in Wesley Study Bible).

Jesus' procession was almost a parody of Herod's! Lowly, riding on a donkey, welcomed by ordinary people, accompanied by his odd collection of disciples and followers. So, what of those strong soldiers who accompanied Herod to demonstrate the power of Rome? Were they an entourage, an occupation force, or a team of bodyguards?

E. Finally, the crowd who welcomed Jesus

What do you make of them? Would you have been with them front and centre cheering Jesus on, or standing back puzzled as to what was going on? Would you have regarded the crowd as a flock of God's people whose hopes were finally being realised or a mob, a rabble a horde or a protest?

Conclusion.

In this reflection I have posed many questions regarding how you might see the different groups who play a part in the story. You will have reached your own conclusions. In some ways it hardly matters what you think of many of the actors in this drama, compared with how you see Jesus. *"Who do you say that I am?"* How you answer this question will massively affect your life and, the life-to-come. We may have our own doubts, but with Thomas "the doubter" I pray that we each will turn to Christ, in the hope of the coming Resurrection and in faith and say, *"My Lord and my God"*.

What I believe is this: the way you relate to Jesus Christ, the language you use to describe Him, will set the tone for how you see everything – and everyone – else!