

Palm Sunday
5 April 2020

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Online

Like many of you, I imagine,
John and I have embarked on a 2000 piece puzzle.
It takes up over half of our dinner table –
which will play host to exactly
zero guests in the coming weeks,
so it seemed like a good opportunity.
Sometimes we sit alongside each other
and work on a section of the puzzle.
Other times we hover for a few minutes on our way past
(for yet another cup of tea).

There was a section of the puzzle that I had put together; about 4
or 5 pieces which made up a bit of fence –
which, try as I might, I could not match to the picture.
I knew the pieces belonged together
and I knew roughly where they needed to go
because of the colouring, but I couldn't make it fit.

I happened to mention this to John Chapman
who took one look at it
and noticed that it wasn't a bit of fence at all.
It was the trunk of a tree.
I had it the wrong way round.
It immediately fitted into the gap.
Amazing that something can be helpful and irritating
in equal measure!

Sometimes we've been looking at things
the wrong way up.

The same was true for me with an aspect of
Jesus' Triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

A small thing. The word Hosanna.
If I'm honest, I've never really thought about it.
It appears on Palm Sunday and in one particularly memorable
worship song from the 90s.

But what does it actually mean?

"Our English word "hosanna" originally comes
from a Hebrew phrase *hoshiya na*.
"That Hebrew phrase is found [Psalm 118:25](#),
[which we have just read together]
where it means, "Save, please!"
[Hosanna] is a cry to God for help. ...
"Help, save me . . . *Hoshiya na!*"

But John Piper notes that,
"something happened to that phrase ...
The meaning changed over the years.
In the psalm it was immediately followed by the exclamation:
"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"
The cry for help, *hoshiya na*, was answered
almost before it came out of the psalmist's mouth.
And over the centuries the phrase *hoshiya na*
stopped being a cry for help
in the ordinary language of the Jews.
Instead it became a shout of hope and exultation.

It used to mean, "Save, please!"
But gradually, it came to mean,
"Salvation! Salvation has come!"
It used to be what you would say when you fell off a boat
into the ocean.
But it came to be what you would say when you saw the
coastguard coming to save you!
[Hosanna] is the bubbling over of a heart
that sees hope and joy and salvation on the way
and can't keep it in.¹

So there are these two meanings, nestled up against each other.
Save, please. And Hooray for salvation!

So which meaning was on the crowd's lips as they greeted Jesus?

Is it a cry of anticipation or a cry of adoration?
David Lose notes
"In either case, this single word
captures the hopes, pleas, dreams, needs,
and expectations of a crowd of people
who were worn out by occupation,
by feeling like strangers in their own land,
and who had little day-to-day hope
of improving their life or lot. And so they turn to Jesus."

Well now, does that sound particularly familiar this week?
We are just entering a season in which
our freedoms are curtailed,
a season in which fear dominates
and our support networks are fragmented.

¹ John Piper

The stresses and strains of the slow calamity
we are witnessing are already being felt.

For some of us that will mean
"Fears about the future, challenges in our relationships,
a general sense of impotence about world events,
less confidence in some of the social structures
than we once maintained.
"Hosanna. Save us."
All in all, [we are perhaps] not all that different from the [crowd]
who welcomed Jesus
and longed for him to change things...and themselves. "Hosanna.
Saviour."²

The crowd who welcomed Jesus with such enthusiasm
wanted salvation, but they wanted it on their terms.
They probably imagined that this man
whom they named Messiah would bring about
a dramatic defeat of the Romans
and restore Israel to its former glory.

What they don't really want, is a Saviour who dies.
That is not part of their imagining at all.
They want someone who will lift them from
the position of oppression they occupy
to a position of freedom.
What they get is someone who joins them
in their oppression
so much so as to include death.

² David Lose

And actually, they don't want a God who changes them by challenging their view of themselves, their neighbours, and their values, [by turning their understanding of power upside down], they want a God who reinforces and even validates these values and beliefs.
“Hosanna. Save us... But don't change us.”

And so I find I can identify with this crowd – whom I have frequently called fickle. Because I don't know about you, but “I would prefer to be fixed than transformed.”

David Lose says this:

“Christianity as [an] on-going program of self-improvement is rather attractive, but Christianity as giving up the ghost of my vain expectations, of looking outward toward the need of others rather than inward to my own hopes, that's a little harder to get excited about. Self-improvement validates the importance of self; [whereas] a commitment to service based on Christ's example ... demonstrates how our existence, meaning, well-being and future is inextricably bound up in the existence, meaning, well-being and future of those around us.”³

Hosanna: Save us ... Salvation is here!

Both meanings were true on that day in Jerusalem, yet the salvation Jesus offered was unrecognisable as salvation. The crowd were looking at the thing the wrong way up. They saw a fence, when what they were looking at was a tree.

It's perhaps little wonder that the cries of “Save us” turn all too quickly and painfully to “crucify him.” Save us but don't change us.

I wonder, once we get to the other side of this present crisis, will we look back and see that this time changed us? Or will we – with a sigh of relief – rush headlong back to the same habits, attitudes and ways of being that were forcibly stripped from us?

So how is God saving us, in this moment? By changing us. May we have eyes to see things the right way up. Amen.

³ David Lose