

*And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord; Hosanna in the Highest*

“Pusey house changes people”. This was the strapline we used only half-jokingly when I was chapel intern here during the heady summer days of 2016. I had arrived at the House nearly a year before, unsure of myself, unsure of the future, but with a strange certainty that I had to be part of this community for a while to explore...something about my relationship with God. Little could I anticipate then the challenges, upsets, and moments of pure transcendent joy I was to experience over the next two years of living in this place of prayer, study and fellowship, but they remain some of the most formative days of my life and are foundational to the ministry I pursue today as a priest in the Church of England. Like John Betjeman and countless others – indeed, perhaps, like yourselves – Pusey House is where I learnt the catholic faith: not some baroque Anglo-papalism but a calmer, less reactionary but no less uncompromising approach, built on the understanding of Dr Pusey and others that the Church of England did not just descend from heaven with the Prayer Book in 1549 but remained the ancient Church of this land, in unbroken communion with the wise and holy men and women who had followed Christ since the Apostles’ days.

Along with the riches of patristic thought and the best of modern *ressourcement* theology, my time at Pusey House helped me towards a new appreciation of how ‘catholic’ the Prayer Book actually is. There is no point in arguing that Thomas Cranmer was anything other than a full-blooded reformer, yet still his desire for continuity and connection to Christianity universal informed the basic structures of English common prayer as we still have them today: the centrality of the Eucharist (at least on paper), daily prayer based around the Psalms and Scripture readings, and the annual cycle of liturgical time. This latter feature – expressed in the Collects, Epistles and Gospels for Holy Communion – provides an especially strong, if often overlooked, point of contact with the wider Church, for those readings at Communion constitute the same one-year Eucharistic lectionary which by Cranmer’s day had been used in Western Christendom for around a thousand years. Today the mainstream churches have moved on from this annual repeated cycle to offer greater variety and a broader use of Scripture at the Eucharist, but we who continue to use the old Epistles and Gospels make a powerful statement – that there remains real value in the ancient wisdom that shaped these readings around the liturgical seasons, and that through them we seek to enter a process of

embodied reflection on Scripture which stretches back to the earliest centuries of our faith.

Now, all of this is just a long-winded way of coming to the question: Why on earth are we using a Palm Sunday Gospel at the start of Advent? In churches that use the modern three-year lectionary they will be hearing Luke's call to stay alert for the coming of the Son of Man, which seems much more on point; here, though, it is Matthew's account of Christ's entry into Jerusalem, "meek and sitting upon an ass" and its colt as he rides towards his final confrontation with the worldly powers. It's a strange thing, and yet: a moment's reflection will help us see how this passage contains much distilled wisdom on the meaning of Advent and how we might use these weeks fruitfully as we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth.

Our entry-point is that beautiful collect which we will continue to use until Christmas, and which conflates Christ's birth "in great humility" with his second coming in "glorious Majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead". The primary message of Advent has always been on our need to watch for the Lord's return in judgment, and implicit in this is the central truth of the Incarnation: that Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, is and always was the glorified Son of Man and the Second Person of the Trinity. So we will start to find resonances with Matthew's account of Palm Sunday once we recognise Christ's arrival in Jerusalem as a type of, and type for, the *Parousia* – the Second Coming. The general meaning of that word is of the triumphal arrival of a king or important official, but here was a *parousia* like no other – no horses or chariots, no streaming banners or blaring trumpets, but a man riding on a donkey and the people strewing palm fronds before his way. Yet the manner of his entrance into Jerusalem could not detract from the shouts of the crowd – Hosanna to the Son of David! Beneath his meek and gentle appearance they knew him for what he is: a Messiah, a saviour, a king. Now, what they may have understood by that is a question for another time, for what draws our attention next is an episode which falls outside our usual Palm Sunday liturgies – the cleansing of the Temple. So the Lord has indeed come, and he has come in judgment against those who have defiled God's house, the place where heaven and earth meet.

I repeat the point: Matthew presents the strange and provocative actions of Jesus that day as a foretaste of what is to come at the end of history when all the world cannot but acknowledge Christ as Lord and King. As such, we couldn't ask for a more fitting Gospel on this First Sunday in Advent, with the

challenge put by all Jerusalem at its heart – Who is this? – answered immediately by the joyful crowd – This is Jesus. Here is the perennial Advent call to watchfulness, for all Christians to take up the cry of that crowd and witness to the everyday delights of God’s love until its full splendour shall be revealed. Ancient wisdom indeed, informed perhaps by a more ready acceptance of the paradox which the Incarnation poses: that the almighty and eternal Creator of the universe became truly human so that we might share in his deathless life forever.

Once we have embraced this saving mystery in our turn, the other key question Advent poses is: how can we attune ourselves to the signs of Christ’s coming and best prepare for the life immortal? The answer to this is again found in today’s Gospel when regarded in a third mode; that is, not only as a reflection on the true nature of the incarnate Word or of his role at the final judgment, but as a comment on the Lord’s constant and transforming *parousia* in our daily lives. We know that Christ’s presence in the world endures even now he has returned to the Father – through the community of the Church, through the sacrament of the altar, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit poured out in the lives of the faithful – but what we might not always anticipate is that, when he comes, he comes as he did that day to Jerusalem: with zeal born out of love to cleanse the temples of our hearts so that we can once more offer acceptable praise and sacrifice to God. The Christian life is, after all, a life of *askesis* – of prayerfully reorienting our desires and affections to the source of all true joy and fulfilment – and Advent sets the ascetical imperative foremost at the start of every liturgical cycle, our call to daily renewal and renunciation of sin so that we may stand blameless and unflinching before the Lord when he returns in glory at the last.

Modern secular culture has sadly eradicated the anticipatory and ascetic character of Advent, with the whole of December now given over to feasting and frivolity and too many regrettable decisions. But it should not be difficult for us to inhabit a different mindset even as we enjoy the social aspects of the next four weeks – to not overindulge in food or alcohol, to make ample time for quiet reflection among all the festive engagements, to remember that the real celebration of Christ’s birth is yet to come, and then our Christian feasting can begin. You will already have your own ascetic practices, or perhaps as in Lent you may now take the opportunity to explore new ones – you can speak to your priest or spiritual director about that. Whatever you do, use this season of Advent well to rededicate yourselves to the pursuit of love in the year ahead. By this we will start to know more surely Christ’s presence in our lives, and with

hearts prepared and hopes affirmed we can welcome him with joyful shouts:  
Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord; Hosanna in the Highest.