

‘Hosanna’, they shouted. ‘Blessed is the King’, they cried. Full of rejoicing, they welcomed Jesus into the city, laying down their cloaks, waving branches, singing, shouting, hailing him as a king. Then but a few days later they shouted, ‘Crucify him, crucify him.’ Having welcomed him as king on this day, they disown him but a few days later saying: ‘We have no king but Caesar.’ And swapping their branches for whips and fists, they laid blows on him as an enemy where they had just hailed him as their Saviour.

How fickle a crowd can be; how fickle this crowd was; and yet, are not our hearts just as fickle? We stand back hearing the two Gospel readings today – one recounting Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, the other his Passion and death – and we can so easily shake our heads at the crowd. ‘How silly, how disloyal, how ungrateful they were’, we may think. And yet do we not do the same thing? Do we not welcome Jesus with open arms when things are going well for us, when things are pleasant and comfortable and prosperous? Then when suffering comes, when there is a risk our association with Jesus might cause us embarrassment or discomfort or to be left out how quickly do we turn away from him? How many in this crowd who followed him into Jerusalem in such joyful triumph followed him out of Jerusalem to be with him when he died on the hill of Calvary? Not even some of his closest friends went with him on both journeys. Not Peter, not Andrew, not James. Would you? Having walked with him today into Jerusalem singing ‘Hosanna’, will you walk with him on Good Friday to Calvary? Will we welcome Jesus into our hearts, our homes, the whole of our lives just when it suits us, just when it is pleasant and joyful and blessed? Or will we say in the midst of suffering and anguish and the darkest of days, ‘Jesus, be with me as I am with you’? Do we only walk with him on Palm Sunday or do we follow him on Good Friday too?

See the Church offers us these two contrasting Gospels today to remind us that no matter the time or place we live in. No matter whether we are rich or poor, young or old. No matter whether we have been Catholics for many years or not, we all risk falling into the trap of the crowd. We all risk wanting Jesus on our own terms. We want him in our life to fix our problems, to make things work well and be successful. We want a nice clean, pleasant, comfortable Jesus. Of course, this is quite understandable. He does want us to ask things from him, to ask for his blessings, to rely on him for those good things.

But he also asks something more of us. ‘Will you come with me to the Cross?’, he says. ‘Or will you just come with me into Jerusalem for the blessings?’ In a sense, Jesus asks us this week, this holiest of weeks in our year, whether we will be part of the crowd and follow him just when we might get something from him, just when it is nice and comfortable and convenient for us. Or will we be part of his friends, part of Mary and John and Mary Magdalene who followed him not just for the glory but stayed with him in the darkest hour too? Are we part of the crowd? Or do we want this friendship with Jesus?

Let us take this question seriously this week. Let us seriously ask ourselves: am I really friends with Jesus, do I consider him my closest friend and greatest companion; do I want him to be? Or am I happy being part of the crowd?

But as we ask ourselves this we must be aware that friendship with Jesus means being with him even in the midst of that great darkness: the Cross. It means sticking with him even when everyone else is shouting, ‘Crucify him, crucify him!’

But know this too: it also means the greatest of blessings and the richest of graces. We will see this in one week’s time when we come to the empty tomb and sing with Mary and John and Mary Magdalene: ‘He is Risen.’

This week, this Holy Week, teaches us that true blessings, true graces, do not come simply by following Jesus like the crowd, seeing him like a vending machine: a dispenser of blessings. No, true blessings and graces come through being with him in the midst of the Cross.

Friendship with Jesus is the greatest treasure, the highest hope, the most profound joy. But it does not come cheaply, as the crowds would have wanted. No, it comes at a great price: the suffering of the Cross.

Let us ask ourselves this week: do I want this friendship with Jesus? Have I wanted it? Do I want to begin this friendship with him? Do I want a deeper friendship with him?

If the answer is yes, then let us follow him very closely this week through his Cross and into the tomb. Then let us take him, Risen and glorified, into our hearts and homes and families and the whole of our lives, sharing everything of ourselves with him as the best of friends would do.