

Palm Sunday is one of the few important days in the Christian calendar that has never been co-opted by the secular world, with cards and little ornaments and the like. It's probably just that it's too close to that other important day that has much bigger pay-off – the one that's all about eggs and rabbits and flowers.

Years ago, we used to give the whole day over to the palms, and celebrated the high point before the darkness of Holy Week. That changed, so that now we only get to take a fleeting look at it before we move on. But we hang onto it anyway, even for the sake of just a few minutes. We like to remember that when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time, people cheered and sang, and tore down palm branches to wave. We like to re-create a little bit of the scene in our churches. Even if it's a nuisance to get the palms ordered two months ahead of time. Even if it's only for the first quarter of the service. And even if we aren't up to actually walking around and waving things any longer. We like to celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

As the story is told in the gospels, it sounds like a spontaneous event,—an unplanned outburst. But whether it was mostly planned or just happened, the event was packed with significant echoes of ancient scriptures and prophecies. And there was a contemporary reference too, that, after all this time, we might not get.

Jerusalem was always crowded for the Passover. The population of the city ballooned to a quarter of a million. And with that many Jews packed into their Roman-occupied holy city, all kinds of nasty, seditious, rebellious things could brew up. So the Romans had to watch them very closely, and take extra precautions.

Just before Passover every year, the Roman governor would leave his official residence on the coast, and parade into Jerusalem in a great show of force. Hundreds of horse soldiers and foot soldiers, all bristling with weapons and shiny armour. Golden eagles on poles. Drums beating. Trumpets blaring. A huge parade, emphasizing the power and might of Rome. Designed to intimidate.

But on this day, there was another parade, coming into the city from another direction: a wandering preacher, riding on a donkey, surrounded by a scruffy crowd of nobodies waving branches from trees, and shouting and singing.

Was it intended to poke fun at the Romans? Once you conjure up the two pictures side by side, it's hard not to see it that way. Did the crowd see it as a parody? Did they join in just to poke fun at the Romans? Some probably did. And some of the others had nothing better to do, so why not just join a cheerful mob and have fun?

Unfortunately, mobs can be a problem. Mobs usually consist of a few people with an agenda, whipping up a lot of people who are either easily persuaded, or who just like stomping around and shouting. If you can get people chanting and marching, you can get them to do all kinds of things.

One thing we've learned, in our age of on-the-spot journalism, is that most of the participants in huge protest rallies and marches have their own idea of what it's about, often an entirely distorted idea, or they have no idea at all but they're excited to be part of it anyway. All it takes is for someone to feed the mob with chants and slogans, and it can be easily manipulated. Come back on Friday to hear how that happens!

The waving and shouting that we commemorate was full of joy and hope and anticipation all right, but for what? Some of them were really looking forward to seeing Jesus because they believed in him. Some were anxious to see him do something spectacular. Just yesterday he raised Lazarus from the dead and then healed a couple of blind men. This was the best entertainment they had. If it was real, it was exciting. And if it wasn't, well, at least they were clever illusions.

Another group was excited by the hope that the Leader of the Revolution had finally come. Every candidate so far had been a miserable failure. But here was a leader who could genuinely claim to be a descendant of David. Someone who could tap into supernatural power. Now the rebellion could finally get going.

And there were others watching who were not happy. They weren't cheering or waving palms. They didn't know or care who or what Jesus was,

* For the Jewish leaders, anything that ruffled Roman feathers, *was a bad thing*.

* For Pilate, who had to keep a lid on this miserable place, *this was a bad thing*.

* For the Roman soldiers, outnumbered by this crowd, *this was a bad thing*.

With all of this going on, how could it have ended well? The entertainment seekers would be

disappointed – Jesus wouldn't perform for their amusement. The revolutionaries would be disappointed – Jesus wouldn't lead them to victory. And the authorities were just plain scared.

No wonder then, that when we join the mob shouting and waving palms and generally having a good time, we'd prefer not think about where it's all going to lead.