

Palm Sunday Matt 21. 1-11; Psalm 62; Zechariah 9.9-12

Two Thursdays ago, people came out of their homes to 'clap for our carers', to applaud the heroic NHS staff who are putting their health on the line to treat people with coronavirus.

When my wife and I heard about it, we thought, "Well we can see that working in towns and cities, but how's it going to work in Blythburgh?" Surely, it would just be us, whistling in wind. But then a neighbour told us that she was going join in, and we agreed to give it a go.

So, at 8pm, we ventured out into the dark, felling slightly foolish. We stood on the edge of the A12, and then we saw in the gloom, that we were not alone, small household groups were doing the same thing, a ripple of applause began, and then increased. Someone had a piercing dog whistle. Behind a wall across the road another started ringing a bell. Then, people's spirits lifted and they found the courage of their convictions: there were whoops and cheers, and the whole thing became, a safely-distanced, but enthusiastic festival.

You may well have done something similar. I found it moving and cheering. It was a kind of release. Not only was it an opportunity to express gratitude to people in the front line, it was a way of showing emotion. There was, out on the side of the road – a real sense of fellow feeling. Another neighbour, further up the village, said on Facebook: "Totally proud to live in a tiny little village thinking that clapping out the window would mean nothing & opened it to hear clapping & whooping & cheers & banging pans."

My friend Martin Wroe (co-author of our book *Lifelines*), said on *Thought for the Day* on radio last Saturday that what happened on Thursday was "a religious moment". I agree. He said it was a bit like Armistice Day when – wherever we are – we pause for a couple of minutes to remember those who gave their lives. It was a holy moment. God was present.

This is Palm Sunday, and we think of the people in Jerusalem who lined the street cheering Jesus, strewing the track with palm branches and cloaks. We know very little of the logistics. Was there some first-century equivalent to Twitter or Facebook, which meant word spread that Jesus was coming to town? Was this an early version of a flash mob?

It strikes me that this probably wasn't a planned demonstration, but a spontaneous eruption of joy and appreciation from people who felt excluded: not so much locked *down*, but locked *out* of public spiritual expression by the gatekeepers of the Temple. These people improvised, and turned Jesus' entry into Jerusalem into a glorious, holy, festival moment.

For the time being, we're locked out of our churches. And we can't gather as the crowds in Jerusalem did. But, as we did a couple of Thursdays ago, we can still discover moments where God is present.

There are fragments of hope and consolation everywhere if we look closely. Every day, I'm listening to a poet read their work on www.lifelines-book.com/podcast Last Sunday, our first lamb of the season was born. We had a Skype meal with our grown-up children – our daughter and her partner in East London and our son in Norway – all of us eating the same menu as if we had cooked together: we sat around the same virtual table. As I compose this, someone texts to say they're dropping off some bread flour at the gate.

We count these blessings to ward off the darkness. And we count God's company wherever we are. I commend to you the cartoon below by Dave Walker who draws regularly for the *Church Times*: the church is still here, because the church exists wherever his people are present.

Even our Prime Minister (not always my favourite man!) has said "There is such a thing as society". People are already talking about what good legacies there may be for us when this shadow has passed. Martin Wroe, again, described this a "nostalgia for the future". We might also call it "hope".

I was struck by a line in today's Old Testament reading from Zechariah. He was looking towards a time when the Israelites' lockdown in Babylon would end, and they would rebuild Jerusalem. He said: "Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope."

"O prisoners of hope." This may sometimes feel like it's our time in the wilderness. But we're not alone, and we still have the gift of spontaneity and improvisation: making it up as we go along. But this time we need wash our palms, rather than wave them!

Malcolm Doney