

# Messiah Disappointment

a sermon preached on

## Passion Sunday of Palms

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at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

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Philippians 2:5-11, Mark 11:1-11; 14:1-15:47

The Messiah is a bitter disappointment. The children of Israel had hoped for so much, and in Jesus of Nazareth many had thought and hoped that now at last the Messiah had come. Some of us watched the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* last Sunday – it portrayed this sense of deep Messiah longing, and its accompanying bitter disappointment. Each time Jesus performs an astounding sign, or delivers of a Messianic-sounding speech, disciples and crowds alike become aroused, inflamed with Messiah-expectation, jubilant and euphoric. In the film Jesus' visits to the Jerusalem Temple are especially poignant. Having arrived, having performed a great ritual sign and prophetic oracle, Jesus steps back from the violent acting out which followers and crowds alike expect, and which he himself must surely have wondered might have been the way.

Watching Jesus' withdrawal's from the Temple felt almost too painful to endure. The crowds, not surprisingly, are bitterly disappointed in him. Disappointment quickly gives way to anger, anger to violence, and massed violence readily becomes murderous. The object of disappointment readily becomes of the object of violent rage.

The liturgy of Passion Sunday of Palms prepares us for Holy Week by concentrating our attention on this movement of the heart – from expectation, to elation and mass euphoria, to bitter disappointment, to rage, and finally to violence and murder.

Yet we *must* be disappointed, our hearts must break, because our Messiah expectation is inevitably too small, because those onto whom we project it cannot possibly bear it, and because God is planting in our hearts a seed which will bear one hundred fold. Surely Jesus must have known disappointment, and its offspring, as his own Messiah expectations were transformed by the Divine will? Perhaps this is a way of making sense of his declaration that it is “necessary” for the Son of Man to suffer?

The liturgy, like the gospel, accurately diagnoses the condition of my heart. I know only too well that same movement - which begins with great expectation, becomes euphoric when a person comes into my life who seems to fulfil my expectation, turns to bitter disappointment when they turn out to not be what I had expected, which fuels my unacknowledged and repressed rage, and, in the worst of my moments, takes some violent form. The Passion Narrative and today's liturgy are indeed as much about me – and dare I say 'us'? – as they are about Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus is the 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith' not because he does something instead of us – that is an irresponsible distortion of the gospel's teaching that Jesus died for us. He is our Lord because in our struggle with humanity, with our own broken and breaking hearts, we can have confidence that there is a One who has gone this way before, who is our companion on the narrow path. Each time we are confronted with the cup of suffering disappointment, which is the way of transformation of our small and ego-centric expectations, we remember there is One who wrestled in a garden,

moving through disappointment, bitterness, rage and violence to a New Jerusalem. Each time our expectation-fuelled euphoria gives way to disappointment, rage, and possibly even violent hearts, we can know that there is a One who goes before us, beckoning us – ‘Do not be afraid,’ ‘This is my body... this is my blood,’ ‘I will go before you to Galilee.’

Take heart! Enter the Great and Holy Week knowing you are in the hands of the best guide:

“who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death –  
even death on a cross.”<sup>1</sup>

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