Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches

We come to Palm Sunday, and one unlike any before. We cannot process with our palm crosses. We cannot read our usual dramatic Gospel. But at least we are here, last year our churches were closed on Palm Sunday.

Many people spread their cloaks on the road. Palm Sunday is a day of crowds. Crowds are fickle. Crowds can change unpredictably. Crowds can be peaceful and quiet one moment, a raging mob the next. A crowd can be a shared celebration, the joyous greeting of a successful football team. Or a crowd can be an angry force of violence and destruction, as we saw recently in Bristol.

Jesus knew crowds. He spent time with many people. He clearly knew how to, as they say, work a crowd. He could read the mood, he spoke with humour, irony and appeal. He could stun a crowd into silence, and he could provoke hostility and resentment.

Margaret Thatcher was infamously misquoted as saying, “There is no such thing a society.” Which ignored the second part of what she said, that society can only exist because it is created when individuals come together. A crowd is a crowd, many people, many unique and individual people. Each person matters.

In St Luke’s account Palm Sunday is immediately preceded by the story of Zacchaeus. You will recall that Zacchaeus was a small man so he climbed a tree to see Jesus better. We may remember that Zacchaeus was a bad man who cheated people in their taxes. And if we remember that then we remember wrong. Like the crowd we have jumped to conclusions. Collective memory isn’t always right.

Nowhere in the story of Zacchaeus does it say that he was a cheat or dishonest. When he meets Jesus he says that if he has defrauded anyone then he will restore it four times over. If he had defrauded anyone – the ‘if’ makes a difference. Jesus very often spotted the person amongst the many, the individual within the crowd, the person left out, ignored, overlooked or despised. Jesus spotted Zacchaeus, and many others.

I spoke last week on the request of the Greeks, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus’ I suggested that most of the time most of the people see the Jesus they want to see, the Jesus that fits their agenda, the Jesus who matches their views, the Jesus that doesn’t ask awkward questions.

The crowd was no different. They wanted a new king. They wanted someone to make life better. They wanted a hope they could get behind. They wanted what you and I want, for our lives to be better than they are right now.

Jesus knew what they saw in him, and he knew he wasn’t going to give them what they wanted. So he rode on a donkey, a parody of a Roman triumphal procession, I am not what you think I am.

To be fair to the crowd even his closest friends didn’t get him right. Judas didn’t set out to betray Jesus to death, he likely believed that Jesus was God’s Messiah, sent to kick out the Romans and bring in a new age of Jewish independence. His actions weren’t designed to send Jesus to his death, he acted in good faith, hoping to provoke the final conflict between good and evil, knowing Jesus would prevail.

Like many, he saw the Jesus he wanted to see, not the man riding a donkey, not the man washing his friends’ feet, not the man who would accept the cross as the only means of doing God’s will.

It is an unusual Palm Sunday. It will be an unusual Holy Week. It will be an unusual Easter. Maybe in this time we will glimpse an unusual Jesus – not quite the person we expect, not quite the man we think we know.