



A Homily by The Very Reverend Tim Dobbin

Palm Sunday

March 28, 2021

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 50:4-9 & Mark 11:1-11

A six-year-old came home from church on Palm Sunday proudly waving her frond. Her Dad asked her about the service. 'It was awesome!' she exclaimed. 'Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. People waved their palm branches and we all sang 'O Susanna.'

Well, not quite... The eight days beginning today are known as Holy Week. They are the most important in the whole church year bar none. Today we accompany Jesus along the palm-strewn road through the East gate of Jerusalem. We share his Last Supper in the upper room and feel the embarrassment as he kneels before us and tenderly bathes our feet. We watch with horror as he is betrayed by Judas, condemned in a rigged trial, denied by Peter, then whipped and beaten. We do our best to stay with him as he stumbles under the weight of his cross along the track to Golgotha. We hide our faces as we stare at his naked and contorted body expiring on the cross. And then we get report that the stone-cold tomb is empty – that Jesus has risen, he's alive again... This is the journey we travel together during this week, the central week in our faith – Holy Week.

We can find the events of Holy Week just too offensive, too difficult. And yet the Gospels devote one third of their length to the events of this final week in Jesus' life. One early Christian commentator stated that the remainder of the Gospel is merely an extended introduction to this week, Holy Week.

So it's vital that we hear this story of Holy Week again and again. It's important that we let this story sink into the depths of our being: a single man taking on the most sophisticated religious system, and the most powerful political empire of the day. Jesus absorbed all that we could throw at him, in order to transform us, to renew us, to make us whole.

It is a week during which we recall that just as the cross cannot be separated from the empty tomb, neither can the empty tomb be separated from the cross. They are one. This is the paradox of the Christian faith. And we see this even in the palm branches adorning the high altar this morning.

We probably use palm fronds today for decoration and don't think too much about them. Back in Jesus' day, those fronds people were waving and strewing before his donkey meant something.

The Maccabees were a Jewish family of brothers who led a popular uprising against the Romans around 164BCE. The Maccabees' followers celebrated their victory and the rededication of the Temple by parading into Jerusalem with... palm branches in their hands. Palm fronds weren't for decoration back then. Folk in Jesus' day associated palms with the overthrow of an oppressive regime by an earlier generation. So when the Romans in Jesus' day see crowds of people waving palm branches around, they feel threatened – those palm branches are like banners for revolution. Now factor in 1.5-2 million Jews in and around Jerusalem at the time, there for a festival celebrating their liberation from a cruel and oppressive power in Egypt hundreds of years before.

It's little wonder that the Romans saw Jesus' entry through the East gate of the city on a donkey as having all the signs of trouble. So they waste little time in colluding with the Temple priesthood to round up Jesus. In other words, even on Palm Sunday the writing is on the wall. The 'triumphal' entry is not what we would think of as triumphant. It's heading in one direction only. The Palms and the Passion cannot really be separated. The paradox of our faith.

Sometimes this paradox can amplify the darkness of all that is happening this week. We will see a lot of the underbelly of human nature: betrayal, deception, abandonment, violence, denial, torture, injustice, suicide, execution... Not a pretty sight. So it's important that we balance this with what God is up to.

And frankly, on the face of it, God does not seem to be up to much. We as humans are behaving at our worst, and God seems altogether powerless, nowhere to be found. Perhaps it's a question you have found yourselves asking as churches remain closed during Holy Week for a second year: Where is God in this pandemic? Has God bailed on us too?

As we reflect on the story of this week see how God's power is at work in Jesus in ordinary everyday ways. Jesus is facing betrayal and death. Yet, what does he do? Something all too commonplace. He sits down with his disciples and shares a meal. As simple as it gets. Simple and yet pregnant with the presence and power of God.

For it is at this meal, he makes a speech – a speech that we have been repeating Sunday by Sunday for two millennia – 'Take, eat; this is my body... Drink from it all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Mt 26.26-28). A shared meal – commonplace, every day and yet the means through which God communicates himself to us, feeds our inmost beings and empowers us to live his life in the world.

We recall this week that midst the darkness of COVID, gun massacres in Georgia and Colorado and the host of other challenges we face, God is making himself known in power to us in the ordinary events of our life – in our meals together with those in our bubble, in chance encounters during the day, in the beauty of a birdsong, in a random act of kindness, in the laughter of a child. Even the most mundane is somehow infused with God's presence and God's power.

This morning we gather to recall and to celebrate the beginning of the final week of Jesus' life. These are the most intense days in the church's year of grace. The climax is the Great Three Days or Triduum (from Thursday sunset to Sunday sunset). It is a time when we say 'Yes' once again to being part of this living, dying, rising again mystery which lies at the heart of Christian faith. It is a time when we marvel at God's generosity even in the face of the worst human beings can do. It's a time when we rejoice in the possibility of our own transformation through God's grace. Let's embrace these eight days with our Lord. And let's ask the Holy Spirit to fill us as Paul writes with the same mind that was in Christ Jesus during these days. May Christ's mind shape our lives in his way of self-giving love.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.