



# *Fifth Sunday in Lent*

## *Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe*



Sunday 21 March 2021

### READINGS

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 51: 1-12; Hebrews 5: 5-10; John 12: 20-33

## *The Hour Has Come.*

The Gospel passage from today from John 12 verse 20 seems to be read out of order. Next week, we go back and read the ten verses before this. Next week we commemorate Palm Sunday, Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, when he is greeted with cheers as the King of Israel, the one sent to be the Saviour. The passage we read *this* Sunday, in which Jesus speaks about his death, takes place in Jerusalem, *after* the excitement of Jesus' arrival and the cheering and waving of palms.

In some ways it is a contradiction, and perhaps that is why we read it before Palm Sunday: because we need to experience and live this contradiction as a truth that is central to our Christian faith – now during Lent, throughout Holy week and the Easter season, and every day as we discover what it means to follow Jesus.

In this passage, not for the first time, Jesus speaks of "his hour". Here he says: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," and "Should I say save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." As readers of John's gospel, we understand "the hour" as not just one moment but much, much bigger – of universal significance. This "hour" is the *event* that transcends time and place. This "hour" is the event that unites past, present and future.

What happens next is that death is turned on its head and death and life become one. The sacrifice and suffering of the cross become the victory in which God is glorified, lifting Jesus up triumphant; the gift through which Jesus draws all people to himself. The hour has come. John shares his vision of Jesus' mission and purpose revealed in the words spoken here. Jesus explains that he is going to face down the world – in the Greek it is written as "*kosmos*" and some theologians use the words "The System," to help us to understand the political, religious, cultural, personal and universal significance of what lies ahead. It's about challenging power structures and oppression and injustice. It's about staring down death and sin that rob us of life and freedom, not just in our small individual selves but in our social and political systems.

Pastor Robert Cornwall writes, "Jesus has come into the world to participate in a cosmic battle. He has come into the world to stand up to "The System." He has come to face down the "ruler of this world," but he chooses to do so through the vehicle of the cross. Jesus refuses to fight the battle on the terms dictated by the Ruler of this World (*kosmos*). The System seeks to bring order through violence. Jesus chooses to act through purposeful nonviolence, overturning the System.

Today we live in two worlds. We know the Son of Man has been lifted up. Just as Jesus says in the passage from John's gospel, the prince of this world has been driven out. We know, believe and act in the conviction that death and evil and suffering will not prevail. And yet...

How can we say the ruler of the system is driven out, when around the world and here in this city, police shoot protestors, the economy only thrives because of inequality and exploitation, production and consumption are destroying our planet, a global pandemic is seen as an opportunity for profit, and we are negotiating patents in the face of humanitarian disasters. Despite our faith, despite our prophetic vision, despite our ways of proclaiming God glorified here and now, we still pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done." We live in between the now and the not yet. We are people of resurrection and redemption, in the midst of death and degradation.

Maybe, to quote Yeats, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity." When Jesus said, "the hour has come," it was perhaps not just the hour for Jesus but, as his followers, it was and is "the hour" for us. In our communion service we pronounce 'the mystery of faith', "Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory." United with Christ in his death and resurrection, we are united with him in his suffering and his victory. We participate in this "hour", this event, in the present.

Speaking of his own death, Jesus said, "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds." I began my message today by speaking of the contradiction central to our faith as followers of the Christ. In us we carry both life and death. As we open ourselves to the call to life, we find we must also die. This process of dying to self is part of our Lenten reflection. When Jesus says that we must hate our life he is not saying you must not want to live. He is talking about entering into life here with him, which is life in its fullness. It is you in your very essence, without the hard outer shell of false self.

Our hour has come to enter the central event of humankind's participation in the life of God. To do so, we cannot cling to the very thing Jesus came to overthrow – the systems that keep us the same, the ladders we build to raise ourselves up, the mechanisms we cling to in order to feel in control. This is the false self that plays along with the power and politics of the systems of the world, even in our own relationships with family and friends. Perhaps we cling to bitterness, to self-absorption, to superiority. Each day we are invited anew to enter deeper into the mystery of faith. What are we holding on to, personally and as a community, that holds us back? What do we believe keeps us safe? What life, potential and opportunity will remain just a single seed?

The evils of the world require more than external change. Our only hope of personal and societal transformation is from the inside out. Can we trust the words from the prophet Jeremiah? Our covenant of love with God is inscribed on our hearts. There, in our deepest essence, we find the very presence of God. This Lent, in your own life, perhaps the kernel of wheat lies in the dark earth, feeling like it is dying, but it has fallen to the ground in surrender. It swells, bursts and is no more, but from within a new green shoot pushes through the soil towards the light, a new plant grows, bringing with it many new seeds, more life, more hope. I believe this transformation reaches beyond the self.

Trust the gift of life in death. Embrace the hour. Dying he destroyed our death, rising he restored our life. As we participate in that mystery, we live God's glorious kingdom into being.