

PALM SUNDAY 5 April 2020

Readings:

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Psalm 31: 9-18

Philippians 2: 5-11

Matthew 21:1-11

Today is Palm Sunday, the last Sunday before Easter. We celebrate Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and the beginning of the week of the Passion.

Let's first hear a few verses taken from the reading for today.

Isaiah chapter 50 verse 7 and 8:

Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore I have set my face like flint and I know I will not be put to shame. He who vindicated me is near.

Philippians 2 verse 5 and 6:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

Matthew 21: 8-11:

*A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. **9** The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" **10** When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this? **11** The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."*

Today is a particularly difficult Sunday to worship "virtually." We are used to holding little crosses like these and processing around the church, re-enacting that first Palm Sunday. Today, we are being asked to sacrifice our services in the interests of defeating a particularly nasty enemy – the corona virus Covid 19, and I'm sure we are all willing to do so in the interests of saving as many of our people as possible.

So, since we are living in a virtual world for now, I would like you to imagine a clear day in Judaea, some 2000 or so years ago. Jerusalem is preparing for Passover with, perhaps the same energy which we used to prepare for lockdown – everyone making sure they had what was necessary. But this day has a few added tensions. From the west comes a very grand procession. Pontius Pilate and other Roman officials know the significance of Passover, and there are many activist groups stirring up trouble, trying to take back their Judaea from the Romans and re-establishing Jewish rule. So this “get the message” procession has it all. Legions of soldiers, marching in time, creating the vision of power as only such military parades can do. There are standard bearers, holding the eagles, and the inscription SPQR (the senate and the people of Rome) there are horses – the finest in the known world, and the governor himself, held aloft and riding, in a position superior to those watching, and of course, we have the ultimate symbol of authority, the fasces, a bundle of rods with an axe head prominent, the symbol that says to the sullen angry people below, “don’t mess with Rome. WE are Rome, and we have conquered you.” The Jewish authorities are just as worried. What hothead is going to take on this authority and get himself and a lot of other people killed? No wonder the high priest and others were nervous.

But from the east, another procession takes place. This is very different. A lone figure sits astride a very young donkey, and the rag tag and bobtail are making a raucous noise along the road. Some are putting their cloaks on the ground for the little donkey to walk on, others are stripping the trees and waving the branches, and the word that comes through again and again is “Hosanna!” Hosanna – save us. The cry of the oppressed, the activist, the angry young people, the desperate single parent, the chronically sick, the ordinary ones who have to take on so much of the care of the poor that it becomes another burden. Hosanna. Save us.

Of course, the procession ended in the heart of Jewish authority, the temple, and the nervous priests were concerned about the noise, what it meant and how the Romans would interpret it. And in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus can’t have made things easier for them when he got rid of those selling things in the temple. Yes, Jesus was stirring things up.

But it wasn’t what they thought. Jesus was not about anti-colonial politics. Yes, this WAS a triumphal march into Jerusalem, and yes, for the first time, Jesus was allowing himself to be recognised by an adoring public. But Jesus came for other

reasons. He “set his face” towards Jerusalem or as Isaiah put it, the servant “set his face like flint.” Flint is what was used to strike a spark in order to light a fire. The invention of matches changed all that, so we are not familiar with the concept. If Jesus was coming into Jerusalem, it was to confront – to be struck and to light a fire. And that fire involves all of us. As Paul said, Jesus did not make *use* of his relationship with God or *as* God to defeat evil. Instead, He did what he always did – he walked alongside us and worked and still does, work through people like us. He taught what was from God, whether or not he was criticised for it, and along with everyone who ever fought against injustice and hardship for the powerless, he spoke out and was arrested for his troubles. Anyone who has ever been messed around by government institutions will know that particular form of harassment, and the same thing happened to Jesus, and to make things happen, we often have to set our faces like flint towards that which needs to be confronted.

And now, we are being asked to set our faces like flint to face up to Covid 19. But it's more than that. We are being awakened to more than an unknown virus. We have always known but never completely responded to the HIV/Aids problems of this country. There are still about 30% of those infected who should be, but are not on ARVs. Not necessarily because of ineffectiveness of the health services, but poverty and ignorance and poor communications have left many unwilling to come forward. Some are afraid of being tested, and it's these with their compromised immune systems who will be very ill indeed if they get this virus in their systems. And the TB sufferers are likewise more at risk than the rest of us. The many elderly whose frailty makes them vulnerable, a lot of them have children in overseas countries which are similarly in lock down and cannot get to their parents because they are facing the same crisis. We are being asked to sacrifice our lifestyles for the weak and helpless. There has been a lot of goodwill and generosity expressed in this country thus far, but, (and please God it's only for three weeks), what happens afterwards? Are we going back to our Johannesburg northern suburbs lifestyle? Or are we going to do as Paul suggests, put on the mind of Christ and see out responsibilities as financially secure citizens to walk alongside our less fortunate fellow countrymen and women and pull them out of their depths of ignorance, superstitions, fear and despair? Will we set our faces like flint against the eye-watering salaries and undeserved bonuses paid to the upper echelons of our society, while unemployment and poverty bedevil the lives of so many? Can we hear the cries of “hosanna” amongst the hungry

children who are stuck because there are no school meals for three weeks? Can we respond to the “Hosannas” of all those in need?

As we have time to think, because we are forced away from the distractions of daily life, let us follow that donkey and its master, and see what crucifixions we need to go through to make us new people. What in us needs to die so that what God is calling us to can be heard and perceived? Can we turn the crucifixion of Covid 19 into the beginning of a country renewed again, where the horrors of corruption and division and our own selfishness alongside them are things of the past? Let us, set our faces like flint, because our Saviour the vindicator is near. Hosanna – save us, Lord Jesus. The little donkey brings recognition of our calling, and this is followed by sin and selfishness being crucified, and only then can we look forward to the resurrection of a new way of living.