



Palm Sunday

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 24 March 2024

READINGS

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; (Mark 11:1-11) Mark 15:1-39

Triumphal Entry

Today is Palm Sunday, the start of Holy Week. This feast day is significant in the life of the Church and it is also known as Passion Sunday. Prior to Vatican II Passion Sunday was always observed on the fifth Sunday of Lent as a means of preparing God's faithful for the events of Easter. Passion Sunday and Palm Sunday were subsequently combined and this is why in the in-person service we have the lengthy reading of the Lord's Passion.

But perhaps to pursue a particular line of thinking with regard to our readings and reflection today, we could rename Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday as the Sunday of unfulfilled expectations. The main focus of today is Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem as he is greeted by throngs of people who hail him as king and Messiah.

Why are the people filled with such joy and jubilation at Jesus arrival? Because of what they anticipate Jesus will do for them. The people who greet Jesus are poor and disenfranchised. They have been suffering under excessive burdens of taxation and debt and many have been forced off their land as a result. As we see in the Gospels, they and their children are plagued by demons and disease, and sometimes follow Jesus for the simple reason that he is able to provide them with bread. They also have a vague notion that a main factor in their plight is the oppressive rule of their Roman overlords and the Jewish elite who conspire with them for power.

Many of these people would have come from the chora, or countryside. Perhaps some might have come from as far away as Galilee, some 100kms north of Jerusalem. They are fickle but they are also desperate. They are looking for a reason to hope, and Jesus is that reason. To them, Jesus represents the possibility of their lives improving, the possibility of expelling foreign occupiers and establishing a more just and equitable society.

All of these hopes and expectations are spectacularly dashed just a few days later as Jesus is crucified. And so we arrive at a question to pose for ourselves this Palm Sunday or, as I have chosen to rename it "the Sunday of unfulfilled expectations" and the question is: what do we do in the face of our own dashed hopes? What do we do when our own expectations are crucified and come to naught?

And what is interesting is that the circumstances I've outlined above bear some similarities to those we are experiencing currently in South Africa. One might say that after liberation in 1994, and the transition to a democratic government, the hopes and expectations of the majority of South Africans have not been fulfilled. This is perhaps unfair because there is certainly a lot of positive work which the ruling party has achieved in spite of the myriad challenges facing our fledgling democracy.

But to return to the question: what do we do with our disillusionment? We can ask this as communities and as a nation (perhaps particularly pertinent given we are in an election year) but we should also ask it

in terms of our individual and personal journey. A common response to disappointment or being disillusioned, especially over time, is resentment and bitterness, perhaps even anger – “Jesus promised to deliver us from all of our problems and they seem only to have gotten worse and Jesus is now nowhere to be seen.”

The dashing of hopes and expectations, in whatever form this takes, is always an unpleasant and painful experience. We feel cheated. Worst of all we feel cheated by God. God did not live up to his side of the bargain.

Whereas this can be a common (maybe even natural) way to respond to such circumstances, adopting this attitude shuts us off from new directions and new possibilities God may be presenting us.

What are expectations and are we entitled to have them? Most people who experience disappointment would answer ‘yes’ to the second part of this question, which is precisely why they feel so let down and aggrieved. But really expectation is an attempt to mentally predetermine one’s reality. And while we do exercise agency and we do have the ability to shape our future to some extent, we certainly cannot control reality entirely, and many things lie outside of our control. We therefore experience disappointment when our predetermined picture of reality, or our expectations, do not align with how reality actually plays out.

In contemplative practice they say that most of us are incapable of living in the present – this in fact part of the goal of contemplative practice – and we fall into one of two categories. Those of us who are unhappy or uncomfortable with our present either are prone to hankering after the past, dwelling on a distant past which we feel was much better than our current reality, or we live with a of childish expectation that our future is somehow going to miraculously improve and all our dreams will be fulfilled.

To my own mind, part of the problem is that we wish to resist the events of Good Friday, we wish to avoid the crucifixion at all costs – we refuse to be subjected to it because we think it is not fair or we are not deserving of such treatment and such circumstances, not releasing that if we relinquish control, and submit to God’s plan for ourselves and for our lives, resurrection happens automatically.

Amen