

Palm Sunday Reflection 5.4.20

The Bible Passage is Matthew 21:1-11

You might like to find last year's palm cross and have it to hand as you read.

The events of the first Palm Sunday are very familiar to us. We recount them every year and then straightaway we start counting down to Easter. This year, we have the time to slow right down and think about the meaning of what Jesus was doing and the relevance of his actions for us here and now.

After three years of astounding teaching and incredible ministry, the Son of God was an outlaw. There was even a bounty on his head – 30 pieces of silver. Jesus knew that he faced certain death in Jerusalem but he went into the city in a way that put him centre stage, a way that drew everyone's attention to him.

Focus on that scene for a few moments. Jesus is riding a colt, a donkey so young and unbroken they brought its mother as well to walk with it and steady it. He is using a powerful visual aid to let everyone know that yes, he is a king, he is the long awaited Messiah, but he comes in peace. Yes, he is powerful, but he comes in humility. He is the Servant King, the King who washes his disciples' feet, the King who comes not with an army but with a weapon so powerful that not even death could resist it - the sacrificial love of God laid out upon a cross.

Jesus collected a crowd as he travelled and now thousands more poured out of the city to meet him. In that crowd were Jesus' disciples and people he had forgiven and healed. The religious leaders were there, looking for a way to get rid of him and the Jewish resistance, hoping Jesus had come to raise an army and overthrow their Roman oppressors. Some were just sightseers, come to see what all the fuss was about.

The adulation and expectation was intense but many among the crowds wanted Jesus on their terms, not on his. As he rode into Jerusalem that day, Jesus was inviting people to recognise him, to welcome him, not as a political or military king but as the king of their hearts and lives, the king who would die to set them free from sin and death.

Take up your palm cross and look at it.

The palm leaf has been folded into the shape of a cross. It has been made to conform to a shape that is not natural for it. In the same way, Jesus had to shape himself to his cross. He begged God to find another way to deal with our sin but in the end he yielded, 'Not my will but yours be done.'

Hosanna means 'Save now!' It is an acknowledgement that we are sinners and only the death of Jesus on the cross can save us. When we admit our guilt, Jesus forgives us and gives us his Holy Spirit and then he says: Now - take up *your* cross and follow *me*. Now you too will be folded into a shape that doesn't come naturally. Now you will begin to conform to a new image. Just as these palm fronds are folded tightly into the shape of the cross, so our lives must be shaped by Jesus' cross and all that he accomplished for us and for our world. See how the palm frond is under tension. We should feel that tension in our own lives as we conform ourselves to the cross of Christ. Tension between what we want and what Jesus

asks of us. Between God's ways and the culture around us. Now more than ever, we must trust him and obey him and allow him to do things his way.

How relevant this is for us today. As the world struggles to deal with Coronavirus, Jesus is calling his Church to a new shape. The shape of courage in place of fear and self-giving instead of self-protection, where our knowledge of God and his love and power overrides the uncertainty that surrounds us and the incomplete facts and figures that bombard us.

Dolly Parton, speaking this week to her 3 million Instagram followers, said 'I think God is in this, I really do. I think he's trying to hold us up to the light so that we can see ourselves and see each other through the eyes of love. And I hope we learn that lesson'.

Ms Parton is not the first person I would expect to quote at a time like this. Yet, I agree with her totally. God is holding his Church and his world up to his light. He wants us to see ourselves as he sees us and reconfigure our lives so that everything about us is cross-shaped - reaching upward in trust and worship to him and outward in kindness and honesty to each other. Jesus is calling us to shape up and lift him up as the only answer to COVID-19 and every other problem faced by the human race.

Prayer

Father God, we have forgotten what the death and resurrection of Jesus mean for our world. Jesus has conquered sin and death and sickness. Life in all its fullness is ours to live and to proclaim.

As we celebrate Easter so differently this year, we lay our lives before you again. Help us to live the resurrection life that acknowledges Jesus as our Lord and King. Remake us in Jesus' image and make all that we are and all that we do resonate with his love and his victory.

In the Name and for the glory of Jesus. Amen.