

Homily Palm Sunday 10th April 2022 – Canon Alison Tyler

(Readings : Luke 19.28-40, Luke 23:1- 49)

We are at the end of Lent and on the threshold of Holy Week, we are still dealing with the consequences of Covid 19, and with scarcely time to catch a breath the world is caught up again in the horror, waste and futility of a large scale war. It is marked, as all wars are, by death and the suffering of innocents, by large scale disruption of supplies and of food and by economic and social harm with particular impacts on the poor.

Those who lived in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus would have recognised all of these things, for they were also living in interesting times of danger and difficulty. They were hoping for better things, a King in the mould of King David , a Saviour and a liberator, no wonder Luke's account of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem is so full of excitement.

And it sounds as if Jesus made a deliberate decision to present himself as Messiah, coming down the Mount of Olives towards the Holy City on a colt, a very significant choice. (In the Old Testament, King Solomon rode to his coronation on his father David's mule – 1 Kings 1:33). The results are entirely predictable, given that the city is full of Passover pilgrims. The crowd respond enthusiastically. It's easy to imagine the buzz, with holidaymakers singing Psalms at the tops of their voices: 'Blessings on the King who comes, in the name of the Lord!' And Luke's Jesus rides the wave, entering wholeheartedly into the spirit of the thing. He tells the Pharisees who complain about the crowds chanting: 'If these keep silence, the stones will cry out!'

From then on it seems the die is cast. Neither Caiaphas nor Pilate is going to tolerate an upstart rebel, a so called 'King' causing trouble at Passover. But the message of the king, riding on a donkey can also be a message of peace, Jesus comes in peace and humility, not as a warrior on a war-horse.

The crowds and the disciples were so excited they seem to have forgotten all the warnings that Jesus had given them on the journey about what will happen to him in Jerusalem.

As we are preparing for Holy Week here today we are all part of that long Christian tradition going back all the way to that first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem – we walk with that great cloud of witnesses following Jesus on the way of the Cross. As we follow him through Holy Week may the Lord cause us to question our own assumptions about power, vulnerability, brokenness and what it means to follow the Messiah.

Because after today the events of the first Holy Week become darker and darker.

Although we know the story so well, we usually hear it in small parts, but the whole passion reading as we hear it on Palm Sunday really drives home the stark brutality of what was done to Jesus and prepares us for it.

The unfolding story of God's love for us revealed in his Son needs no linguistic embellishment. The language is spare and direct, it is about what was done to Jesus, the power of the words used conveys the powerlessness of Jesus, because after his arrest he will have given up all control over what happens to him.

He was arrested... brought before Pilate .sent to Herod... questioned...mocked...blindfolded...insults heaped on him...deserted...scoffed at crucified his disciples denied him and fled

Each of those words and others like them, is a snapshot of some of the humiliation and sufferings of Jesus in Holy Week, and yet each action has been and is continually replicated thousands of times throughout history right up to our own time. There is it seems nothing very original about sin.

God's son, God's living word, source of all life allows himself to be arrested, moved from place to place, questioned by corrupt politicians, mocked by a fickle mob and brutal soldiers. They had praised him and celebrated as he entered Jerusalem. How quickly the praise turned to abuse and celebration into tragedy when human beings, corrupted by power and violence, valuing only military triumph and the victory of might instead of the glorious truth of God's sacrificial love and grace.

It is a dreadful shock each year to realise again the full depth of Jesus's sufferings on the one hand and the dreadful things that people still do to each other on the other.

But in Paul's letter to the Philippians, when he says, "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." He shows clearly his understanding of the promise and of the tragedy at the heart of creation. He writes of Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in

human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.”

And so, it will continue throughout the last 3 days of Holy week, this stark description of Jesus’s suffering and abandonment, he is not responding and he will not respond to the mockery, he will not be calling on his followers to defend him, but he will instead allow the evildoers to continue to push him all the way to the cross. Up to the point of his arrest, he has been largely in charge of the drama; but now he relinquishes his power and says little.

We will watch again this week the abandonment, and the loneliness of the Lord of all life as he is being led to his death.

Throughout the long, terrible night of Thursday, we will feel his profound love for his friends at their last supper together, we may weep with him at the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and hear his painful question at his arrest: “Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!”

We will enter with him into that darkness that seems to triumph throughout the night and the day that follows. All hope seems to depart from those who loved him best and maybe also from us. The power of darkness, as we know well, can still be all engulfing.

And so, we can enter Holy Week, as participants, not just observers, especially this year. Let us watch and listen. We too are subject to feeling the weight of darkness in a world torn by strife and hatred. We may hear his words, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And again, his words as he dies: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Coincidentally, I belong to two groups which have both recently joined the Community of the Cross of Nails to work for reconciliation, it was founded by the Deans of Coventry and Dresden after the end WW2, to seek peace and build reconciliation. Both their cathedrals had been destroyed by bombing. and in Coventry, the ruin remains as it was found after the bombs, while the new cathedral stands next to it, rebuilt. After the bombing, someone found two charred beams of wood which had fallen in the shape of the cross. They tied them together and the cross stands today at the altar.

Behind it, these words are engraved, words that stand as a testimony to

the events of both the Passion of Jesus and of the war: "Father, forgive." This was both Jesus's response to the Crucifixion and his hope for the future, for as Desmond Tutu wrote so movingly 'there is no future without forgiveness'. Amen

The words that describe the experiences of the week are a litany of emotions that represent the ups and downs of the week. We know them: *hosanna, confrontation, betrayal, denial, trial, scourging, crucifixion, tomb*. Then the most electrifying sentence ever uttered—"He is not here! He is risen!"