

Sermon for Palm Sunday – 28th March 2021

Dr Anne Shave

Poem before the sermon, by Anglican priest and poet Malcolm Guite (with an introduction he wrote last year 2020 during Coronavirus lockdown)

We come now, on Palm Sunday, to the beginning of Holy Week: a strange Palm Sunday, a strange Holy Week, in which we cannot make the outward and visible journeys and gestures, exchanges and gatherings that have always bodied forth the inner meaning of this week; the procession of palm crosses, the choral singing of hosannah, all those things that echo the events of the first Palm Sunday.

But the inner journey is more necessary than ever, and in the sonnet that follows I have explored the truth that what was happening ‘out there’ and ‘back then’ as Christ entered Jerusalem is also happening ‘in here’ and ‘right now’. There is a Jerusalem of the heart. Our inner life also has its temple and palaces, its places of corruption, its gardens of rest, its seat of judgement.

Now to the gate of my Jerusalem,
 The seething holy city of my heart,
 The saviour comes. But will I welcome him?
 Oh crowds of easy feelings make a start;
 They raise their hands, get caught up in the singing,
 And think the battle won. Too soon they'll find
 The challenge, the reversal he is bringing
 Changes their tune. I know what lies behind
 The surface flourish that so quickly fades;
 Self-interest, and fearful guardedness,
 The hardness of the heart, its barricades,
 And at the core, the dreadful emptiness
 Of a perverted temple. Jesus come
 Break my resistance and make me your home.

The Sermon

A teacher asked some students to suggest some modern-day heroes. After a thoughtful silence, one student ventured, ‘It’s difficult, because today we have celebrities rather than heroes.’ What do you think about that response? Do you think it is true? If you were to think of modern-day heroes, who might you name?

One who springs to mind for me, is this man: Captain Sir Tom Moore. You probably recognise him as the 99-year-old Englishman who chose, under lock-down conditions last year, to walk laps around his garden with his walking frame to raise money in support of the NHS. His aim was to raise £1000 before his 100th birthday. His journey gained international attention and he ended up raising more than £32 million (NZ\$61 million). What about him do you think inspired people so much?



Discuss – Humility, frailty, determination, service, sacrifice?

“He united the nation and **gave hope** when it was needed most.”

This man was definitely a hero, and one I think will be remembered with affection for a long time.

As he rode into Jerusalem, Jesus was hailed both as a hero and as a celebrity (if we might use those modern-day descriptors). What was it about him that attracted such attention and praise?

Jesus was widely recognised and honoured as an extraordinary teacher and also as a miracle-worker. People had heard what he had been doing (not in Jerusalem, but nearby) and they wanted to see him. A primary reason some members of the crowd had turned up and hailed Jesus with such enthusiasm was that they had heard that Jesus had raised Lazarus from death. That’s spelled out in John’s account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

We know, too, that at least some of the crowd who gathered that day saw Jesus as the promised Messiah who would bring hope and liberation to the people of Israel. They understood the symbolism of Jesus choosing to ride on a donkey – they would have known the prophecy of Zechariah (which is quoted in Matthew’s account of this event): **“Tell the city of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you! He is humble and rides on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”** The words of acclaim from Psalm 118 which the people shout also indicate that they view Jesus as a coming king. But even Jesus’ disciples haven’t yet understood what kind of king Jesus is, or what sort of kingdom he is ushering in. Yet Jesus has told them at least three times what is going to occur:

Mark 10:32-34 *“Behold we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and will hand Him over to the Gentiles. They will mock Him and spit on Him, and scourge Him and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again.”*



What is their response?

When our Bible study group met on the Tuesday before last, we read about Jesus’ disciples James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were among Jesus’ closest friends but although their

understanding of Jesus grew during their time with him – they came to believe that he was the long-awaited Messiah – they did not understand that he was ushering in a different kind of kingdom – a kingdom of justice and everlasting peace. In a passage which follows Jesus’ prediction of what is about to occur, and which just precedes today’s reading, James and John ask, **“When you sit on your throne in your glorious kingdom, we want you to let us sit with you, one on your right and one on your left.”** They wanted to stake their claim to honour and power. And they weren’t alone. When the other disciples heard what James and John had requested, they became angry. Jesus called them all together to him and said:

“You know that the men who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. This is, however, not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, he must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people.”

Just seven verses later, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, beginning his journey to the cross. As Paul writes in our reading from Philippians:

“Of his own free will, Jesus gave up all he had and took the nature of a servant. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death – even death on the cross.”

We can choose to read today’s gospel simply as a record of an interesting historic event – an event which is recorded in all four gospels (with variations in details and in the writers’ interpretations of what is going on) – but by pairing the gospel reading with the passage from Philippians 2 the lectionary encourages us to do more than that. Like James and John, like Peter and the other disciples, like those fans in the crowd on that day, we are encouraged not only to think about what we **believe** about Jesus, but also about how we will **behave** in response to him.

How might we respond? This morning I would like to suggest two answers to that question. The first is about our *attitude* and the second is about *action*.

1. Attitude:

We are to have the same attitude (or mindset) as Christ. That is what Paul says:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

It is our hope that and our responsibility to co-operate with God's work in us, but having the same attitude or mindset as Christ is not something we can bring about through our own efforts – it's something to seek and to pray for constantly. That's perhaps why some hymns are so loved – they put into words what we know we need to ask God. Here are a couple of my favourites:

"May the mind of Christ my Saviour, live in me from day to day, but his love and power controlling all I do and say."

*"Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways;
re clothe us in our rightful mind,
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise."*

Or as Malcom Guite put it in the poem Elisabeth read for us: *"Jesus come
Break my resistance and make me your home."*

Action: Some words from our next hymn, *The Servant King*, express our desire to learn (throughout our lives) how to emulate Jesus' humble service:

So let us learn how to serve
and in our lives enthrone him;
each other's needs to prefer
for it is Christ we're serving.

The following poem also expresses something of the connection between our acts of service and our desire to honour the Lord. It also reminds us of so many of our brothers and sisters throughout the world who are not able to meet at church today, or are only able to meet in much more restricted ways.

Palmless Sunday (published in a Catholic newspaper April 3rd 2020)

We gather virtually these days,
with virtual palms and virtual cries of praise.
Virtual cloaks we scatter underfoot
to greet the Son of David whom we long to meet.

Two metres wide (at least) the Covid social distancing
that separates the would-be members of the crowd
as we avoid quite gathering to greet him
sanitised, clean-handed at the city gate.

But there is nothing virtual about the Prince of Peace,
subverting all our violent dreams of glory
with his choice of gentle cross-marked beast
to humbly carry him to Zion for the Feast.

Nothing virtual either in the bonds that link us all today
 in honouring the ones who risk their lives to make us well;
 in worrying for the elders home alone;
 in understanding pressures hid behind closed doors.

Communion, then, is this: this web of praying, caring,
 picking up the phone, dropping round some food,
 sharing (at safe distance) smiles and tears,
 this swapping words of hope for fears.

This is what we celebrate on Sundays in more normal times.
 This is what our breaking bread and sharing cup proclaims:
 that the Easter Lord still comes to share our little feast,
 comes even through locked doors with words of peace.

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Let's conclude by returning to that modern-day hero,
 Captain Sir Tom Moore. I listened to a Christian
 broadcast about him, and as the person being
 interviewed reflected on Captain Tom's influence, he
 said this:

*Our value is in God's love for us, irrespective of what
 we do or don't do, but nevertheless it's important to
 know that we can do little things and they'll still
 matter. We might not be able to run a marathon, but we might be able to walk around our garden.
 We might not be able to walk, we might just be able to pray. We can do little things, and what a
 wonderful example Captain Tom was in doing little things that made a huge difference.*

