



Cashmere Presbyterian Worship for Palm Sunday

Sunday 5 April 2020

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Call to worship from Psalm 118

²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Lighting of the Candle

Opening Prayer

Dear God,

Thank you for sending your Son and paving the way for our lives to be set free through Jesus' death on the cross. Thank you for what this day stands for - the beginning of Holy Week, the climax of the Lenten journey towards the power of the cross, the victory of the Resurrection, and the rich truth that Jesus truly is our King of Kings.

Thank you that this day also shows us a saviour who was determined and courageous – prepared to do God's work in the face of much opposition. We live, O God, in a time of great hardship; help us to stay strong and true to you. Help us not to follow after the fickle voice of the crowds, but to press in close to you, to hear your whispers, and seek both your strengthening presence and your gentle guidance. Be with us as we worship today.

In Jesus name, who taught us to pray saying

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

Hymn for Palm Sunday

This is among the oldest works of Christian hymnody, written around 821.

*All glory, laud, and honour
To Thee, Redeemer, King!
To Whom the lips of children
Made sweet Hosannas ring,*

Thou art the King of Israel
Thou David's Royal Son,
Who in the LORD'S name comest,
The King and Blessèd One.
All glory, &c.

The company of Angels
Is praising Thee on high,
And mortal men, and all things
Created make reply.
All glory, &c.

The people of the Hebrews
With palms before Thee went
Our praise and prayers and anthems
Before Thee we present.
All glory, &c.

To Thee before Thy Passion
They sang their hymns of praise;
To Thee now high exalted
Our melody we raise.
All glory, &c.

Thou didst accept their praises;
Accept the praise we bring,
Who in all good delightest,
Thou good and gracious King.
All glory, &c.

Text for the sermon

Matthew 21 The Triumphal Entry (NIV)

¹As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." ⁴This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵"Say to the Daughter of Zion,
'See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.' "

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The 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!"

¹⁰When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"¹¹The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Sermon: Where does my help come from?

Introduction:

Today's passage is about a journey. Jesus having departed from Jericho arrives with his disciples at Bethphage on the Mount of Olives and prepares to move on into Jerusalem which can be clearly be seen across the Valley that lies between them. It is a memorable journey – for over 2,000 years now Christians around the world have remembered this journey on this day, Palm Sunday.

What memorable journey comes to mind of you? I have one that came to mind as I reflected on this Palm Sunday story. Three years ago I was in India. We were staying in the city of Kalimpong, set in the foothill of the Himalayas. The people who owned the place where we were staying encouraged us to get up early one morning and watch the sun rise on Mount Kanchenjunga, the 3rd highest mountain in the world – only a little lower than Everest. So we got up at 5.30am, caught the waiting taxi and went up above the city to a Buddhist monastery, making our way on to the roof, looking across the valleys to this majestic mountain. As the sun began to rise on the mountain, the huge doors of the monastery below us swung open and Buddhist monks began to pound on enormous gongs – ringing in the morning sun as it rose on the mountain. It was spine chilling!

As Jesus arrived on the Mount of Olives, he too looked across to another mountain – the Holy Mount of Jerusalem and the magnificent temple set on at the top of that hill. I was standing on the Mount of Olives a few years ago. You look straight across the valley where the garden of Gethsemane is, to Jerusalem and the temple Mount, these days occupied by a wailing wall and a mosque. For Jesus, as he looked across to Jerusalem, he was looking towards his destination. That was place where he was headed. But there was more than a place to mark the destination. As he looked across at this temple mount, he most probably felt a chill run up his spine as well! For he knew his journey was moving towards painful torture and death as well – there was a very painful part of the journey to be faced just across the valley! Just before they left Jericho, in Matthew 20:17-19 we read

Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, ¹⁸ “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”

We reach Palm Sunday 2020 having also been on a journey with Covid 19, the Corona virus. Do you remember the first reports of Corona Virus out of China? They reported their first death on Jan 11. We watched from afar as it developed and travelled so quickly around the globe until it reached our country with our first reported case on February 28th. One month later the whole country is in lockdown and we watch as other countries like Italy and the US go into meltdown! This has been a quick moving journey and while there is so much uncertainty about what is ahead in terms of sickness, unemployment and financial downturn, we do know, as Jesus did on Palm Sunday all those years ago, that there is suffering ahead, hardship on the near horizon – in the words of the famous Psalm ‘we are walking in the valley of the shadow of death’.

So what does this Palm Sunday story tell us in the context of our journey with COVID 19? How does it help us cope with what lies ahead right now? I would like to share 3 things I have discerned do speak from this story into our situation right now:

1. God goes before us

This is so strongly communicated in the story. Firstly, it comes out in the strange instructions to the disciples to go and find the donkey and her colt. And they found things just as he said they would be. Imbedded in this text is the sense that God had gone before them. And we see it secondly in the prophesy from Zechariah of a King coming gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I find this such a reassuring idea. It is a constant theme of scripture – God going before us preparing the way. And I personally incorporate this into my rhythm of prayer – ‘God go before me into these uncertain times!’

There is a prayer attributed to St Patrick that picks up this theme so beautifully. It says in part:

“Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left ...

Jesus knew that as he faced tough times ahead, that he was not doing this journey alone. His Father God went before him. So we can also know God travels with us into uncertain times.

2. Times like this call for Christ-like courage

There is so much fear and anxiety around us at this time. I was in the supermarket yesterday and saw tension and stress on the faces of the young workers in the store! We need courage at times such as this.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, signifying that he came in as a man of peace not a man of war. Nevertheless, he was also showing great courage and spine in what he did. There were forces working to get him and to kill him. There was a bounty on his head. Despite all that, he did not sneak into Jerusalem by some side gate, he came into a main gate paraded as the Messiah for all to see! One of the lectionary readings for today is Isaiah 50 where we get a prophetic image of the steely determination of Jesus to do the will of God no matter how hard that might be:

⁵The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. ⁶I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. ⁷The Lord GOD helps me; therefore, I have not been disgraced; therefore, I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; ⁸he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.

I love that last bit – ‘Let us stand together’ – it is a call to stand together with God, with Jesus and with each other to combat this thing!

I do think it is times like the present where Christians and the church need to stand together and courageously confront what is happening. To be God’s people in times of distress. We have such

a good history here – I was reading about the tremendous witness of the Christians in previous times of epidemic. An article written by Lyman Stone makes this point eloquently. He writes:

To find the moral resources to tackle COVID-19, both its possible death toll and the fear that stalks our communities alongside the disease, we have to look at the resources built in the past. For me, that means examining how people of my Christian tradition have handled the plagues of the past. The distinctive approach to epidemics Christians have adopted over time is worth dusting off. For example, during plague periods in the Roman Empire, Christians made a name for themselves. Historians have suggested that the terrible Antonine Plague of the 2nd century, which might have killed off a quarter of the Roman Empire, led to the spread of Christianity, as Christians cared for the sick and offered an spiritual model whereby plagues were not the work of angry and capricious deities but the product of a broken Creation in revolt against a loving God.

This habit of sacrificial care has reappeared throughout history. In 1527, when the bubonic plague hit Wittenberg, Martin Luther refused calls to flee the city and protect himself. Rather, he stayed and ministered to the sick. The refusal to flee cost his daughter Elizabeth her life. But it produced a tract, "Whether Christians Should Flee the Plague," where Luther provides a clear articulation of the Christian epidemic response: We die at our posts. Christian doctors cannot abandon their hospitals, Christian governors cannot flee their districts, Christian pastors cannot abandon their congregations. The plague does not dissolve our duties: It turns them to crosses, on which we must be prepared to die.¹

That is pretty tough stuff. But then I think about our front-line people in this epidemic crisis; health workers, police, supermarket workers and the like. I think of the courage they need at time like this. And our call as Christians right now is to step up in whatever way we need to in order to support them and the people around us. That call will be different depending on our situation – for some it will be to the front line. To others it will be quietly in the background checking in on the most anxious and lonely of our neighbours.

I would like to suggest that our personal narrative at time like this can be: 'I am a follower of Jesus. I will follow his example and 'set my face like flint' to whatever God calls me to. And I will seek his loving presence beside me as I walk this tough journey. And I claim the promise of Jesus recorded in Matthew 28, 'and lo I am with you til the end of the age'

So first, God goes before me, second, Jesus walks beside me as a shining example and a strengthening presence.

3. Know the ultimate destination!

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem the crowd cried out 'Hosanna'. It was a word that was often used in Jewish worship. It is a word of praise but underlining that praise was a plea for salvation. So when people called out Hosanna they were effectively saying 'God you are great and the source of our salvation in times of trouble'. For the people who were in the crowd cheering Jesus on in this story of Palm Sunday, the trouble was the oppressive Roman government. For us today, the

¹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/13/christianity-epidemics-2000-years-should-i-still-go-to-church-coronavirus/>

trouble is the virus that is oppressing the whole world at this time. What is God's response to this call of 'Hosanna – all powerful God save us at this time?'

God brings a powerful response – the most powerful response possible actually. It is a response that transcends time and space and applies to all times of crisis wherever and whenever they may be. As Jesus stood on the Mount of Olives and looked across to Jerusalem, he saw a destination that contained both the cross and the empty tomb that spell out both salvation and hope for all humankind.

The wonderful writer and theologian CK Chesterton put it this way: 'we have a God who knew his way out of the grave'

Jesus' journey was not to end in death, but travelled through death to resurrection. It did not end in terrible despair but triumphant hope for all.

Conclusion

This is the penultimate Sunday of Lent 2020. In Lent Christians around the world spend 40 days traveling with Jesus towards the Easter events of death and resurrection. This year the Lenten journey has been accompanied by a terrible pandemic sweeping our world. As I think of that, as I remember Jesus arriving on the Mount of Olives and looking across to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, as I remember the amazing morning watching the sun rise on Mount Kanchenjunga, my anxious soul turns to Psalm 121

*'I to the hills will lift my eyes
Where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord
The maker of heaven and earth'*

These are such comforting words for we people of Cashmere with our church set on the Port Hills of Christchurch, from whence on a clear day we can look across the Canterbury plains to the majestic Southern Alps ... and as we do our eyes lift even further, they lift to the Lord from whom our help comes at time like this.

A Prayer of St Patrick

I arise today
Through the strength of heaven;
Light of the sun,
Splendor of fire,
Speed of lightning,
Swiftness of the wind,
Depth of the sea,
Stability of the earth,
Firmness of the rock.
I arise today
Through God's strength to pilot me;
God's might to uphold me,

God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's hosts to save me
Afar and anear,
Alone or in a multitude.
Christ shield me today
Against wounding

“Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.”
I arise today
Through the mighty strength
Of the Lord of creation.

— *Saint Patrick*

Benediction

For all who have contracted coronavirus,
We pray for care and healing.
For those who are particularly vulnerable,
We pray for safety and protection.
For all who experience fear or anxiety,
We pray for peace of mind and spirit.
For all affected by job losses and business failure
We pray that no family will face financial burdens alone.

For our brothers and sisters around the world,

We pray for shared solidarity.

For public officials and decisionmakers,

We pray for wisdom and guidance.

Father, during this time may your Church be a sign of hope, comfort and love to all;

Grant peace.

Grant comfort.

Grant healing.

Be with us, Lord.

Amen.