

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020**  
**Palm Sunday**

**Collect**

True and humble king,  
hailed by the crowd as Messiah:  
grant us the faith to know you and love you,  
that we may be found beside you  
on the way of the cross,  
which is the path of glory.  
Amen.

**Readings**

**Liturgy of the Palms – Matthew 21:1-11**

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’ This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

**Liturgy of the Passion**

**Philippians 2:5-11**

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
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.

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

#### **Matthew 27:11-54**

**(For the longer version, read Matthew 26:14-end of 27)**

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son." ' The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

## Sermon

These are extraordinary times. Times that call into question who to believe; what to do; where truth lies. That is the very nature of Holy Week. Whichever of the gospels we read, there is a sense in which tension becomes heightened. From an auspicious birth, and a remarkable start to his ministry, baptised not only in water but by the Holy Spirit, it is not long before what Jesus says and does begins to raise questions. We might ask ourselves how a message of love of God and neighbour could prove so controversial, but we know, too, that living out that love asks questions of us; demands something from us. And for those who were doing well out of the status quo, that was not welcome.

And so, here as we begin Holy Week, and most especially on Palm Sunday, we find ourselves walking with Jesus from the adulation of the crowds as he enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey to the derision of those same crowds as they choose to have the notorious criminal Barabbas released, and watch Jesus be put to death. In the speed of the change, we find ourselves disorientated and confused. From start to finish our expectations are challenged and confounded. We cannot help but ask ourselves where truth lies.

Let's take a brief walk through the events of Holy Week. We begin with Jesus entering Jerusalem. The people want a revolution, and they think Jesus is going to bring it. So they hail him as their king, strewing palm leaves in his path and shouting in his support. But look carefully. This king is making his triumphal entry on a donkey, the lowliest of beasts. Already, if we are looking, we realise that this kind of kingship may not fit with our expectations. Jesus may be a threat to those in authority, but not because he wants to take their place. And not because he wants to lead a violent revolution against them. What he stands for turns our world upside down in a completely different way.

From the triumphal entry, we move to the passion narrative. We begin with Jesus being interrogated by the High Priest, and then by Pilate and the chief priests and elders. I wonder how we would expect him to respond to this interrogation? Should he be making a defence? Explaining himself? Perhaps even blaming others in order to save himself? Of course he does none of those things. Whatever we might expect someone – or indeed we ourselves – would do when interrogated, it isn't what Jesus does. He largely keeps his counsel, offering only one or two enigmatic answers. Our expectations are turned upside down, so much so that his interrogators simply don't know what to do. They are supposed to be in control, but they don't feel like it.

And so we return to the crowd. The same crowd that had so willingly welcomed Jesus, hoping that he would lead a revolution or insurrection, suddenly turns against him. Whatever he stands for isn't going to offer what they think they want. And so, when asked by Pilate who they want released, they choose Barabbas. We might believe we know the danger of popular opinion, how quickly it can change. But it is still bewildering to watch it happen. To realise that the hero of one moment becomes the villain of the next.

As Jesus walks to his death, carrying his cross, being helped by Simon of Cyrene, and finally facing crucifixion, perhaps the most noticeable feature of the retelling is how little we hear from Jesus himself. We watch him being mocked and ridiculed; we see his clothes being divided; we hear even those crucified by his side joining the taunting. And throughout it all, Jesus remains silent. If we expect him to fight death, to plead his case, to call for help we will be disappointed. If we are hoping for words of inspiration or guidance, we will not find them. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus's only words come from Psalm 22 – my God, my God, why have you forsaken me. And yet once again our assumptions are overturned by those words of the centurion. Whatever it is that he saw of Jesus in these final hours convinced him of one thing. Truly this man was God's son.

For many of us, the last few weeks have been disorientating and confusing as we have come to terms with a very different way of life. We have had to realise that in the current situation many of our natural impulses – to reach out to one another physically, through a hug or by popping round or going out for a coffee – simply are not possible. As a society that has always placed a high value on education, it can seem breath-taking the ease with which we have closed schools, universities and colleges. And having seen a constantly growing economy as important, we suddenly realise how insignificant this seems when placed alongside the health and wellbeing of individuals.

The current circumstances are challenging and testing for us all, and perhaps for some more than others. We have probably never valued our supermarket staff more highly – and the fact that we have come to recognise their worth is surely something to rejoice in. Yet the disorientation for others of finding themselves unable to work and facing the challenges of a reduced or non-existent income is also significant.

As I said at the beginning, these are extraordinary times. Times that call into question who to believe; what to do; where truth lies. I was speaking about Holy Week, but the same can be said of the here and now. So perhaps more than ever the story of Holy Week will speak to us this year.

The path that Jesus walked was a path of love. Love of God; neighbour; and self. That is where truth lay then; and it is where truth lies now. What he said and did confounded expectations and turned people's preconceived ideas upside down because he placed love first. And that love included everyone. Those on the margins; the poor; the infirm; women. Not to mention the tax collectors and those who had gone wrong in their lives.

Having our world turned upside down is confusing and uncomfortable. And in times like these we need to know where to place our faith. Where we find truth. However it is that you are feeling in the current climate – whether you are fearful, or not; whether you are frustrated, or not; whether you feel redundant, or not. Whatever it is that you are feeling, the most important message is that you continue to be held in God's love. That more than anything is the message of Holy Week: that there is nothing that can separate you from that love. That you are not valued for what you do or what you earn, but for who you are. For

your beautiful self, made in God's image, and loved by God. That is the truth of the past, the present and the future. And it's a love that will never let us go.

Amen