

## **Palm Sunday 2020**

**Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29 Matthew 21:1-11. Psalm 31: 9-18**

I have to tell you that as we arrive at Palm Sunday - I'm feeling nostalgic and a bit off 'the beaten track', but I'm still committed to 'go the distance' and take the journey from Palm Sunday, into Holy Week, until we arrive at the new dawn of Easter Day.

Palm Sunday brings back memories for me. Memories of when I was a Sunday school teacher. The girls were elegantly waving their palm branches to the entrance hymn and singing hosannas and the boys were running ahead, so that they could have a sword fight in the pews! Thankfully I never had to deal with a donkey as well!

I wonder today, who or what you remember or most identify with, as we step into the drama of Holy Week? You too may be feeling nostalgic, 'off the beaten track', committed to the journey of your faith. But you may also be feeling confused as to how we speak of Jesus and of the sacrifice he paid for us all, when there is so much fear, pain and sacrifice in our world today.

In Matthews's gospel account of the entry into Jerusalem, the stage is set for Jesus' journey to the cross and the unfolding of the sacrifice that will give rise to the Good News of Jesus Christ, on Easter Day.

Today, due to these unprecedented times, the stage is set for the unfolding sacrifice of so many lives. Lives offered in loving service to one another. Lives taken by an indiscriminate disease. Lives, money, power, talents and time - all laid down in the longing to save and protect the most vulnerable in our communities.

On Palm Sunday, we encounter the crowd on the way to Jerusalem and all those who gathered around Jesus as he entered the city. They represent a whole range of people in society, both then and now - rich and poor; sick and well; romans, jews and gentiles; the rulers and the governed; the people of Christian faith, other faiths, or none. Just people like you and me, all trying to make our way and make sense of this place and time.

Today, we may not be gathering in the crowds and places that are familiar to us or with the people who are dear to us. In this time of social distancing, we may be gathering in unfamiliar places. Meeting with people in different ways - online by computers or smartphones; returning to letters by post. We may be meeting with people who know Jesus; some who love Him; some who misunderstand Him. We may be meet with others who are completely unaware of Jesus - but who seem to follow His call to love and serve yet might not consider themselves to be disciples of the God, who loves us all.

In these incredibly challenging times, many people continue to be inspired by all that God has done for us and will continue to do for us, in the days to come.

Some have been inspired by the words of the Psalms, reading them each morning and evening, in their daily prayers.

Psalm 118, in our readings today, will help us all to recall our faith in the everlasting and timeless goodness of God, in his offer of mercy and salvation for all, beyond these difficult times.

Some have asked the question of how they can spend their time in isolation productively?

Some folks have been looking afresh at the beauty in creation, appreciating afresh a routine of daily exercise, or in spending more time their gardens (which are suddenly looking much better tended!)

Others are finding new ways to pray and worship through phone apps, with 'crowds' that 'Zoom' together and some in silence or solitude.

Many have taken up a volunteer role from home or in the community. Others have taken up or renewed an interest or hobby to reflect their creativity and sense of purpose.

But, some of us may not feel motivated to do anything very much – let alone share a wave of hope on this Palm Sunday. Some people will be questioning God's presence, in our cities and towns which are in such trauma and turmoil – across the globe.

A whole range of people in society, both now and back at the time of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem - rich and poor; sick and well; romans, jews and gentiles; the rulers and the governed; the people of Christian faith, other faiths, or none - may well reflect on the questions, put before us in our gospel reading. Who is this man; this prophet; this Jesus of Nazareth; this Son of David; the one who comes in the name of the Lord? How do we follow him in these days? And do we know whether God is really doing anything real in the world at all?

Psalm 31, also on your sheets this week, has some beautiful words for lamenting and lifting of our fears and concerns to God, in the verses presented to us in the lectionary today. These verses invite us to gather and express the deep questions of loneliness, of isolation and in the depth of bereavement, felt already by so many in the brokenness of the world today. And they carry us, just as the donkey carried Jesus to a place of renewed trust in The One who brings comfort in the darkest night and the glimmer of hope at the dawn of each new day.

It is important to know, especially in these times, that we can also sit with the sadness and sense of loss in lives taken or where life is fragile and fragmented, and God's presence and His purpose for us seems distant; when we weep, lament and cry out for mercy for ourselves and others; when the whispering and lament of the world around us creates more fear and concern on every side; when we can together still be committed to 'go the distance' and take the journey from Palm Sunday, into Holy Week, until we arrive at the new dawn of Easter Day, trusting in the God who will deliver us and make His face to shine upon us, despite the events outside of our control and the crisis that we face together today.

In the coming days, we will all come face to face with the fallout of this crisis and also with the unprecedented kindness of the communities that we live in. There will be times of pain

in the night and times when we cry out to God and fall to our knees in prayer. And yet, it is precisely when we are brought to our knees that we too must walk the witness of Holy week.

Jesus arrives, humble but triumphant, through palm branches and hosannas. And then from here, we will see our Lord live through many of our own worst fears and nightmares; he is accused, he is mocked, he is deserted, he is killed and betrayed, denied by his friends.

Palm Sunday to Holy week is a journey for us all to take. To identify with the characters of the story and challenges that speak into our own circumstances in the present day, in a world headlined with disease, poverty and injustice and death.

Palm Sunday into Holy week is a story for each one of us and for all people. It's a story that speaks into the broken bit of our world today, into the lives of our neighbours (near and far away), friends or people we have yet to meet. People who God will point us to, in order to share our and His story of sacrifice and salvation.

It's a story that asks us today to stay with Jesus, to remain with him and in him. Not just in the good times, when the people are rejoicing, but also in the lamenting and the confusion of the days of the unknown. It asks us to walk in witness with Jesus from Palm Sunday, waving, waiting, praying, preparing to stand at the foot of cross, serving family, friend and stranger. Telling others of his humble sacrifice for every human heart. Crying out together from our homes, doorways, gardens, webcams, workplaces –

'Our God Saves...Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest Heaven',

in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to new life, in The One who comes to bring the Good News of salvation for all - Jesus of Nazareth.

The One who came to invite us to join him on a journey of God's passionate and relentless quest to redeem each one of us in love. For there are and will still be times of joy, as we embrace each new morning, as we are witness to the rising up of faith, hope and loving service in the community all around us.

And as we hold our palm crosses today - if we have them, or perhaps instead hold up our palms and hands in prayer - we are invited to remember the hope and promise that we hold as followers of Christ, for ourselves and for all humanity, in the coming of the servant King.

***Rev Leisa***