

## **Palm Sunday – Rev'd Hans Christiansen – Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> April 2009**

**Readings: Isaiah 50. 4-9a, Psalm 31. 9-18, Philippians 2. 5-11, Mark 11. 1-11**

With today's palm celebrations, the five weeks of Lent is about to reach its climax as we enter into Holy Week. 'Out of the ashes' has been our theme for this Lent. We have been 'Cinderella' journeying with and in ashes; literally as we all are reflecting on the aftermaths of the bushfires and metaphorically as we have sat with the ashes of our own lives, waiting for new life within to emerge.

Today we seemingly leave the ashes in the background for a moment as we wave branches and sing praises and joyfully greet the lowly king riding humbly into Jerusalem on a donkey. But we all know, of course, that today's feast, while joyful, is wrought with the shadows of ashes and pain, (hence the colour red).

Jesus' royal entry into Jerusalem, based as it is on the prophecies of Zechariah in the Hebrew Scripture, was not the triumphal beginning of what the crowds and some of his followers would have wanted. They had hoped for a Messianic, Davidic king who would restore justice and get rid of the Roman oppressors. But Jesus enters, as we all know, as a different king altogether.

Jesus' kingship is defined not by worldly strength but by vulnerability and the cross; not by way of force and coercion but by way of taking all things onto himself, even violence, without any retaliation.

When Jesus failed to act like a conquering king, the same crowd who had cheered his entry into Jerusalem turned their backs on him and looked for another hero. This kind of behaviour is not difficult to understand, because unfortunately we too often give up on people when they are not strong and meet our expectations, don't we?

Let us hear again the words from Philippians 2 set for today:

*"Let the same mind be in you as in Christ Jesus...He 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 has highly exalted him...so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend...."*

Jesus is the saviour king, not through power or might, but through vulnerability, emptiness and weakness - therefore, St Paul says, "God has highly exalted him". It is a total reversal of what people had imagined.

The whole scene today is wrought with irony and the reversal of values, characteristic of all of Jesus' life and the whole gospel. Everything is turned upside down. A king through vulnerability! Power through weakness! What nonsense in the eyes of the world, yet it is the power of the cross.

2000 years on and we are still having major struggles to understand the power of the subversive gospel. It goes against what we think. At least at first, we, like the crowd in the gospel, want a God of power who can fix everything for us. But we all know

deep down that God is not like that, otherwise we wouldn't have natural catastrophes because God would intervene.

We have to learn to live with what life throws at us and within life find the divine presence.

Holy Week begins today and following the readings and liturgy faithfully throughout the week can be profoundly uncomfortable. It is not a week of pious clichés and religious platitudes. It is a week when we are drawn into the depths of pain and human brokenness and then through to the glorious Easter morning when new life emerges from the ashes of pain, broken promises and death.

It is hard-lived transformation and therefore true spirituality.

Today we shout hosanna and make noise and cheer. Tomorrow we sit at the foot of Jesus as Mary anoints him for his death. Tuesday we listen to Jesus' wisdom of transformation, how life comes through death. Then Wednesday the terrible betrayal of Judas leading into Thursday's beautiful institution of the Eucharist as a symbol of service and love and how Christ will always be with us in the breaking of bread. Then Friday: violence and death. Saturday's silent waiting for the joy of Easter dawn on Sunday.

What a week! No one can say that Christian faith is not about life itself.

Can't you see yourself somewhere within the passage of this week? You might not personally be in resurrection, or you might not feel connected to the pain of the cross this year. There is a time and a season for all of us here: one season we are praising (as we do today); one season we are doubting and confused and afraid; one season we are betraying either ourselves or our neighbour – ultimately betraying Christ. One day we even crucify Christ and abandon him, and one season we run toward his healing, risen Presence like the Women on Easter morning, eager to be touched and breathed upon.

And through it all is the presence of Christ, silently watching us as he watches and looks around in the temple in today's gospel. He watches us ever so gently; when we betray him, when we praise him, when we long for him; all the time he is there loving us as he keeps knocking at the doors of our heart, hoping that we will listen and open.

Just as he couldn't force the Roman Empire to retreat, and as he can't stop the bushfires from raging and wars from erupting, so he can't force himself upon us, that is not his way. His way of love is to ride humbly and lowly within everything.

To be Christian is to find oneself in Christ. This week we will once again find ourselves as individuals and as community within the mystery of Christ, the mystery of death leading into life.

Today we celebrate, shout and sing praise to the prince of peace who comes in the name of the Lord. Yet tomorrow the story darkens as does our own lives so often. One day it is praise the next betrayal. Isn't that the story of all our lives?

Don't we all oscillate between hope and despair? Don't we all have moments when we abandon love and forgiveness and give in to fear, anger and aggression? And don't we all have moments when we are overcome by love and forgiveness within?

Let us today renew our commitment to ride with Jesus all the way. Can we remain committed to God's way of total love and utter forgiveness, even when we doubt and are in pain ourselves? Can we stay true to Jesus' profound way of non-violence and vulnerability and thus take part in God's redemption of the world? Or will we again walk out with Judas when our hopes and dreams are not met? Will we walk past the risen Christ on the street and thus keep crucifying him? I am sure we all will. But God keeps forgiving us, hoping that we will grow deeper into his ways of self-emptying and love.

Let us ride on with Jesus, praise him today and stay with him as the women did when friends left him. Let us remain faithful to his life of loving service and ride with him as we spread our cloaks before him and once again commit ourselves in this Eucharist to Jesus' way of creative and loving non-violence. Amen.

Hans Christiansen