

## **SERMON: 5 April 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

**Reading: Matthew 26:14-27 and Philippians 2:5-11**

### **Palm Sunday 2020**

Since it's Palm Sunday I want to say something about that even though we didn't read the story from Matthew 21.

There is something in that story that speaks to us today.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey he was hailed as the Messiah King who would rescue the Jewish people from Roman oppression.

Hosanna they shouted. Save us!

People who hadn't turned to God before were turning to this itinerant rabbi from the backwoods of Nazareth.

Help us they cried.

In recent weeks, there is evidence that people who have never prayed before, have started to pray.

Help us they pray. Save us from this virus.

What might be the response to those prayers?

One thing is sure. God will answer our prayers.

But it may be in a way that we didn't expect.

The crowds in Jerusalem expected an all conquering hero, a warrior of old, who would trounce the enemy once and for all.

Some of our prayers are like that. We want the enemy virus removed from our sight with the least bit effort on our part.

Some, in Jerusalem, were disappointed with what they saw happen to Jesus.

We thought that he would be the one to rescue us they said when they saw him hanging on the cross.

Did God fail to answer?

Or did God have in mind, what C S Lewis called in the Narnia Chronicles, a deeper magic?

On the surface it appeared like a failure, failure to respond, failure to act.

But deep down, glory waited to rise up from the dead.

It may seem as if our prayers go unanswered. It might seem as if having to go through suffering shouldn't be necessary.

But what matters is that we learn to trust in the deeper magic.

We learn to face up to the reality of death with the hope of resurrection.

We let God answer in God's way, learning, that as the Psalmist says, our times are in God's hands.

In learning from Jesus that the deep way is to face death in the hope of resurrection, one of the little deaths I think we need to face up to, is our need to let go of power and control.

Self help books and coaches urge us all to take control of your life.

One of the things this pandemic is teaching us, apart from the fact that we are all one and we need each other and belong together, is that we are not in control of all things in life.

We see scientists rushing to find a cure, governments trying to contain the spread, people doing what they can to avoid this thing that few of us yet understand.

No wonder there is so much fear around.

But does it need to be this way.

Do we need to be in control or can we accept that we either can't be or don't need to be. Can we let go of the need to have everything mapped out ahead, which usually includes putting our own safety before the needs of others?

Richard Rohr put it like this earlier this week when he said - "If we are to feel at home in this world, we have to come to know that we are not steering this ship".

So, if we're not steering the ship, who is?

Recognising our lack of control and surrendering to the bigger thing that we are a part of (and being led by) and commitment to participation in doing the thing we trust to be right and good.

Christ gave himself to the unshakeable and unfailing kingdom of the God he knew as Father. He surrendered to what he knew to be right and good and true, the way of peace and love, of neighbourly kindness and tender hospitality.

I wonder if there are two things here worth exploring further - firstly, our need to recognise that we are not in control; and secondly our opportunity to become people who live in the flow of Christian hospitality.

1

We must get to the place in life when we recognise that we are not in control of things.

What helps us to do this is to learn to be present; to live in the present, which is to live at peace with oneself and with the world.

In order to do that we need to know, and we can know, that the past is taken care of, as is the future.

Now if we embrace that idea, then all we have is the present, and we can live in it.

We might wish we'd done things differently in the past but we can't change it. It's out with our control.

Likewise we may wish things to be different in the future but we can't guarantee that they will. All we can do, is live today, in the present, and the future will take care of itself.

The Good News assures us that the past is forgiven if we take Jesus at his word.

His blood is the new covenant with God which seals all things, past, present and future.

And if we confess our sins to (God), he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong (1 John 1:9).

You don't need to hang onto the past nor worry about the future.

Christ offers us peace in the present moment, and the courage to let go of our need to control things.

I believe we need this deep sense of peace in the here and now, more than ever before in our life times.

We are living in a time of trauma, where people's emotions are all over the place, and that's perfectly normal in times of trauma.

Each of us will respond differently from one another.

But we need to see this trauma as part of a bigger over-arching story, one in which the past is taken care of and the future greater than the past.

I know that I've found that hope in the story of the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

A reading of Isaiah 50:4-9a assures me that God, in Christ, identifies with the down trodden and the suffering of humanity.

He is on my side.

He helps me.

I know I will triumph through him.

He awakens me and speaks to me.

He opens my understanding.

He gives me words of wisdom so that I know what to say.

Who wouldn't want any of that?

2

Secondly, let me say something of what it might look like to live in the constant flow of Christian hospitality.

We see that hospitality in the last supper. The night before Jesus was killed he is there at the table with his friends knowing that one of them is going to betray him.

And what does he do?

Does he make every effort to get rid of the betrayer?

Does he fight to save his own life?

Does he wrestle for control?

Does he exert power over his friends?

No. He doesn't do any of these things. Instead he feeds them. Every one of them. Including Judas the betrayer.

In the face of betrayal by his closest friends, he responds by feeding them, bread and wine.

Verse 31 tells us that Jesus knew that each of them would desert him in the time of greatest trial.

Tonight, all of you will betray me (not just Judas) ..... but after I have been raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there" (31-2).

So even though all would reject him, the Gospel writer John speaks of a day when Christ would rise and draw them all back to himself.

That day is both coming and even now.

Jesus said, when I am lifted up (John 12:32) I will draw all people to myself.

His attitude in life was not one of insisting on being in control or exerting power over others.

Time and time again, Jesus was seen giving up power and favouring the weak and vulnerable, the outcast and marginalised, resisting violence at every turn.

Here's how Paul put it in Philippians 2 - the attitude you should have is the same as Christ, who though he was God did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead he gave up his divine privileges and took on the form of a slave.

So a question we might ask ourselves today might be, 'how can we identify with Christ, by giving up power, in this time of crisis?

What might that look like?

3

Last week we thought about how times of crisis can reveal people's true colours. This is true of all of us and it's true for those of us who profess to being people of faith and followers of this despised and rejected, Jesus.

The theologian, Sam Wells, wrote an article a couple of weeks ago, called 'This is the moment' in which he says that as people of faith "we've spent decades, many of us, preparing we knew not what for.

Well, now we know.

This is the moment when the world finds out whether being a Christian makes any difference or not.

(He goes on to say, and I'll finish with this)

We're a community defined not by fear but by trust, not by scarcity but by plenty, not by anxiety but by communion.

It's time to show our true colours.

This is the time to find ways to overcome isolation that don't involve touch. We have this opportunity to explore the hinterland of the word with, that doesn't always involve physical presence, but still means solidarity and kindness, generosity and love. We will limit our contact to protect the most vulnerable, but we still need to proclaim that there's something more infectious than coronavirus – and that's joy and peace, faithfulness and gentleness.

It was in its most bewildered hour that Israel in exile found who God truly was. This is our chance to discover what God being with us really means. None of us would for a moment have wished this crisis on anybody, let alone the whole world. But our faith teaches us that we only get to see resurrection through crucifixion; that we see God most clearly in our darkest hour.

Remember what Isaiah tells us. You shall cross the barren desert; but you shall not die of thirst. You shall wander far in safety – though you do not know the way. If you pass through raging waters in the sea, you shall not drown. If you walk amid the burning flames, you shall not be harmed. If you stand before the power of hell and death is at your side, know that I am with you through it all.

Be not afraid, says our God. I am with you like never before.

This is our faith".

And this is the God who leads us on, through suffering and death, to rise in glory.