

## Palm Sunday at St James

We began in celebratory mood in the church hall, recalling the rapturous welcome that Jesus received on that first Palm Sunday. Then, those that were able briefly ventured outside: we processed round the church, carrying surrogate palms (sprigs of Eucalyptus from my garden!), singing 'All Glory Laud and Honour'. For a brief moment our admiration for Jesus could be seen and heard by immediate neighbours and passers-by: neither were likely to have taken much notice or changed their lifestyles as a result of our brief appearance, outside the church bubble.

Jesus was not deceived by the superficial welcome he received either and did not allow his course to be changed by it. He could have ridden the wave of support, whipped up even more and tried to start a revolution there and then: there is power as well as safety in numbers. Instead he chose a riskier and more demanding path, recalled in this liturgical year (C) by reading the passion narrative from Luke's gospel (Ch 22), which we did soon after re-entering church. We began with vv24-30, in which Jesus extols the virtue of humility after an astonishing demonstration of its absence after that last supper with his disciples. George Stuart had translated the incident into a song with words of our time: in it, we sang (to 'Maryton'):

"Whoever wants to be the first,  
Who would be great, must be well-versed  
In serving others- thus stand tall  
And place yourselves the last of all."

The custom is to read the whole passion narrative as a sort of penance to compensate for the fact that we soon forget the cost of it all for Jesus and thankfully lap up the benefits, each Easter. This morning we focussed on the words of Jesus rather than the frailties- exaggerated if not merely alleged- of two of his followers, Judas and Peter. We were taken to Gethsemane in the next passage, vv35-53, and followed this with another of George Stuart's modern songs, which included these words, sung to 'Sandon':

"Right through the night his struggles were intense: would evil win?  
He knew, quite well, the stakes were immense; could evil win?  
This was the end; his heart began to bleed;  
Through love alone, he sensed he could succeed."

When love is needed, sometimes we're asleep or turn away.  
When justice calls, we can be like sheep and run away.  
And let the Christ, alone and cold and bare,  
Be killed again as if we just don't care."

Finally, we read vv 63-71, describing the humiliation of Jesus at the hands of, first his captors, then the chief priests and scribes, who tried to extract an incriminating confession of kingship from Jesus.

I recalled the way I spent Holy Week, 41-years ago. Tilly and I were in South Africa, then under apartheid rule, a system of repression not unlike that which Jesus was railing against. We were taken to a Methodist church on Palm Sunday, where we joined a well-heeled white congregation. It was a time of great tension, marked by riots on the trains taking workers from the townships into Johannesburg. Not that you would have known that from the prayers offered up. Wishing to experience what life was like for the black community, we asked if we could visit a township. Our request came to the ears of Pik Boethe, who had friends in high places. In a day or two, we found ourselves being escorted round Soweto, with a gun-toting military escort! We saw the poverty of the average township dweller but were shocked by the squalor and destitution on the outskirts, where desperate refugees were trying to break into what to them looked like paradise. Our white, church-going friends were more interested in the comparative luxury of the Mandela residence, where Winnie was living alone in conditions no different from the average white citizen. We were taken to workshops for the disabled, no doubt to leave an impression that 'the whites' really had the best interests of 'the blacks' at heart. Like Jesus, we were not deceived by the welcome. Tilly bought the red stole that I'm wearing this morning. It rarely gets used because we have so few days when red is the liturgical order for the day. Red is the colour of costly sacrifice and should colour our every day.

It took someone taking Jesus' way of peaceful resistance, Nelson Mandela, to bring apartheid to an end but the failure of others, black and white, to follow his lead leaves the country in a fragile state today. The path taken by Jesus, the suffering servant, on Palm Sunday and into Holy Week is-by and large- ignored by we, his followers, today and we live in fragile peace as a result. A

contemporary passion play could be produced using places and characters from today's conflicts: Kiev for Jerusalem, President Putin as Pilate, leader of the Russian Orthodox Church as the Chief Priest, world leaders lining the route from the Mt of Olives with shouts of encouragement but no easy solution, either short- or long-term. It would be tempting to cast Zelensky as Jesus but inappropriate: while similar courage, leadership and resolve, he places his hopes in military might, with all its attendant risks of greater conflict. The settings could easily be changed: to Israel, Afghanistan, the Yemen for example: in each one, there would be no difficulty in casting, of finding other divisive and oppressive characters holding the levers of power.

We are followers of the one man whose way of living and dying offered and still offers the prospect of peace and security for all. We paraded with our branches to show our admiration and gratitude. Let us mark this Holy Week by a fresh resolve, when we receive our palm crosses after commemorating Jesus' sacrifice, to fully share and not just recall and revere what he did. There is power in numbers!

*Neville*