

PALM SUNDAY THOUGHTS

Somehow, despite life being so different for us all, we are nearing the end of Lent, and very soon Holy Week starts, with Palm Sunday. I don't know about you, but Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent feels as if it took place years ago, but according to my calendar it was only in late February, the 26th to be precise. On that day we were reminded of our own frailty and mortality in the words "Dust you are, and to dust you shall return, turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ" as the ashes from last years Palm Sunday crosses were marked on our foreheads. As always, a call for self examination, discipline, and repentance, by way of preparation for the observance of the momentous events of Holy Week – and then Easter itself.

In the meantime we seem to all have a lot of space, as options for going out, meeting people have radically diminished. We have crossed meetings, events, celebrations as well as farewells out of our diaries, and in keeping with everything else in the country, we can no longer meet for public worship. And this is remarkably difficult especially in the denial of Holy Communion, which I wrote about the other day. In many ways this Lent has been truly a wilderness experience with all the fears and uncertainties that could involve.

This coming Sunday is Palm Sunday and traditionally the service we hold would start with the Gospel reading from Matthew this year, of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21: 1- 11) in which Jesus was acclaimed by the crowd who tore branches off the trees and spread them in the roadway. The shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David" caused a certain amount of consternation among the authorities, who were always on the lookout for trouble, especially as the Jewish Passover approached.

During this first part of the service palm crosses are blessed and distributed and we take them home to put up somewhere, or perhaps to use as a bookmark in our Bible or prayerbook. Of course we can't do this, but why not either find an old cross you may still have from last year, or make your own out of paper or card and display it in a window, or at your door, as a visible sign that you are entering into Holy Week and our Salvation story?

But during this service the mood changes as we listen to the solemn reading of the Passion Gospel, this year again from Matthew 26: 14- 27:11- 54. This time we are reminded that the clouds are gathering round Jesus, he resolutely turned towards Jerusalem, knowing what was in store for him, and the story darkens as the crowds turn away from him, yes, almost certainly even those who had a few days earlier acclaimed him, but now call for his death by crucifixion, and for the release of Barabbas, a bandit. Along the way we hear of betrayal, dodgy deals, unspeakable cruelty, fear and desertion by his followers.

In a very real way Palm Sunday becomes a turning point, now Jesus is inexorably on the hard road to the cross, and for him there is no turning back. How does this feel in our strange times? Perhaps here it may be helpful to consider his disciples and where they were in this week. For starters they were all frightened, if not terrified. Thomas the Twin had not long before commented when Jesus announced he was heading towards Jerusalem "then let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11: 16). But that only marked the draining away of support from them. Only later after the Resurrection do the disciples actually become courageous and ready to affirm the new reality of the Risen Jesus. They were not at all impressive around the betrayal, trial and crucifixion, they all fled, apart from the disciple Jesus loved, probably John who remained there at the foot of the cross, with Jesus' mother.

But, and this is a hard question for us to consider...would we have done any better? Perhaps not. In the middle of the story, so to speak, they had no idea of the outcome, any more than we have any true idea of the outcome of our present woes.

The Easter experience transformed things, the world was refreshed, Jesus' followers emboldened and hope was reborn. Now as we consider our shared situation against the backdrop of Easter, dare we look for signs of hope? Because it's there, among the kindness of strangers and neighbours, the skill of the medics and carers, the dedication of many, to say nothing of our stoicism and patience at this time.

May God's peace and blessings be with you and your families and friends as we pray our way through these challenging times,

Alice