

The Last Act

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 13 April 2014, by David Gill. Readings for Palm Sunday were Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11, St Matthew 21:1-11.

And so the drama moves inexorably towards its climax. Jesus rides into Jerusalem. The holy one of God enters the holy place of his people – there to be conspired against, betrayed, deserted by his friends, imprisoned, tortured, executed. Today, once again, we watch with awe, struggling to make sense of it all, as the curtain rises on the last act.

Watching, we are reminded again of the baffling ambiguity of the whole drama. We yearned for the long-awaited Messiah – but we discovered a peasant child lying in a cattle barn. We expected the King of kings and Lord of lords – but we saw a carpenter, washing the feet of his friends. We were looking for the Saviour of the world – but we found a man sitting loose to religion's rules, violating society's conventions and enjoying the company of people everyone knew should be despised.

Today, our bewilderment sharpens as the drama enters its closing minutes. The man we've called Son of God turns the temple upside down and collides head-on with religious authorities. The Judge of all the earth will be hauled as a criminal before a provincial colonial governor. The divine life-giver will die in obscurity, between two thieves, on the city garbage dump. He won't even put up a struggle.

Come Friday, we will be asking: what on earth did it all mean? And we'll recognize afresh that the drama in general, and this last act in particular, carry different levels of meaning for different groups of people.

At one level, the days before us are a vivid portrayal of **human bloodymindedness** – or, if you prefer traditional language, sin. That streak in us that makes it all too predictable that we will reject our prophets, murder our messiahs, warp our relationships and corrupt even our most noble aspirations.

Note the first person plural. I'm not talking about "them" and their bloodymindedness. I'm talking about "us" and ours. It would be so much easier if

we could point the finger at another group, hold someone else responsible for the events of this week. For much of our two millenia Christians have done just that.

Shamefully, there is a strong element of anti-semitism in the Christian tradition, even in the pages of the New Testament itself, blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus. This pernicious doctrine has had appalling consequences for the Jewish people. It is nonsense of course. Our Lord was himself a Jew. So were his first followers. He was killed by an array of different people. By humanity at large. The responsibility for the cross rests not with *them*. It rests with *us*.

That cross has significance for many of our contemporaries, be they Christian or not. For is not our age painfully aware of the fatal flaw that runs through our world, our communities, our own hearts? Do we not find it heartbreakingly easy to identify with those weak disciples, that fickle crowd, those self-interested religious figures, that vacillating government official, those soldiers who were merely obeying orders?

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” asks the old spiritual. Yes, we were. We still are. And we know it. That awareness is expressed not only in the religious language we’re using this morning, but in the secular language of much recent literature and many recent films as they have mirrored us to ourselves. A few years ago there was a bumper sticker driving around Sydney that read “Don’t follow me; I’m lost!” A neat summary, many would agree, of the human condition.

As this last act is played out, it reminds us all – Christian and other – that the Church’s faith begins right where we know ourselves to be: with a grimly realistic awareness of the mess we know ourselves to be in.

The stark realism of the Christian faith is one of the things that drew me into the Church. Yes I know -- Christians can be accused of many faults. But you can’t call them starry-eyed sentimentalists. This faith starts with reality as we know it to be. That doesn’t mean everything the Church goes on to say is necessarily true, but it does suggest that at very least the Church’s claims merit attention.

At a second level, Jesus’ final days are an inspiring example of **individual courage**.

Again, this resonates with people far beyond the ranks of the Christian Church. We all warm to courage in the face of adversity – the violinist who breaks a string but struggles on regardless, the boxer almost out for the count who has the guts to clamber back on to his feet and face more punishment, the parent who loses a child but ends up comforting everyone else.

We warm even more when such courage is shown for the sake of others. Remember the “Fukushima Fifty,” the workers who kept going back into Japan’s toxic power plant because, they said, it is our duty? That kid in 2011’s Queensland floods who said save my brother before me? That shark attack a few weeks ago, when the victim’s partner dived into shark infested water to bring her out?

Jesus entering Jerusalem meant a confrontation he knew could end only one way. But still he went.

Such bravery makes us all take note. This last week of Jesus’ life is a sort of universal “Stop” sign. Stop, look and listen, it says. Give your attention to this man who quite voluntarily did such an extraordinary thing. Then ask yourself why.

Again, the man’s courage doesn’t prove the Church’s claims about him are true. But his freely accepted suffering is a further reason for taking the claims made about him very seriously indeed.

Which brings us to the third level of meaning discernable in the Jesus drama of these days. Here, Christians go further than the rest. For we recognize not only a grim portrayal of human bloodymindedness, not only an inspiring portrayal of individual courage, but also and very especially a revealing portrayal of **God’s outreaching love**.

We claim that in this man – his life and death – the mystery in which we live and move and have our being has become, momentarily, transparent before our eyes. That, in him, the eternal being of God was incarnate. We claim many other things about him as well, but all the rest hinge upon this central affirmation.

It’s not an affirmation we make easily, or glibly. Nothing about the mysteries of life and death should ever be said easily or glibly. Beware people who play facile

religious word games about God – for that matter, people who play facile anti-religious word games too. The divine mystery deserves better than to be trivialized.

Nor can this affirmation be divorced from what we said earlier about the depth of our human predicament. Humanity *is* in a mess. Bombs *are* exploding in Kabul and Damascus and a dozen other places as well. Relationships *are* being poisoned by the perverse self-centredness of individuals, races, nations, yes and religious communities too. All these things *are* going on.

But to the eyes of faith, something else is going on as well. I recall reading somewhere of an ex-prisoner on the receiving end of advice from a well-meaning church worker. Listening to the do-gooder, he finally exploded: “The only person who can help me is someone who’s been in the hell that I’ve been in”. The message of the gospel is that someone has been, someone is. For those with the eyes to see, something else is going on.

Precisely because of this “something else,” our hymns on this Palm Sunday are not just songs of sorrow, as well they might be, lamenting the human condition. They are also – remarkably, considering what lies ahead – hymns of praise and confidence.

For that man riding the donkey into Jerusalem is not just a brave man going to be broken on the wheel of history.

He is the embodiment of God’s everlasting grace and mercy, God’s outreaching love for the world. For you. For me. Going on. Undaunted. Unconquered. Unstoppable. To the end.

And beyond.

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