

Palm Sunday

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 17 April 2011, 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, to be betrayed and deserted by his friends, to be imprisoned, tortured, executed. Today, once again, we watch with awe as the curtain rises on the last act.

Watching, we are struck again by the baffling ambiguity of it all. They talked to us about the long-awaited Messiah – then the curtain went up on a peasant child lying in a cattle barn. We expected the King of kings and Lord of lords – but we met a carpenter washing the feet of his friends. We were preparing for the Saviour of the world – but we found him ignoring religion's rules, violating society's conventions and partying with people everyone else despised.

Now, 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 the religious authorities. The Judge of all the earth is hauled as a criminal before a provincial colonial governor. The divine life-giver dies, in obscurity, between two thieves, without even putting 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.

The suffering and death of this good man have significance for many of our contemporaries, Christian and other. 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 churchmen, that vacillating government official, those soldiers who after all 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!” An accurate 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 where we know ourselves to be: with a grimly realistic awareness of the mess we know we are in. That stark realism is one of the things that drew me into the Church.

Christians can be accused of many faults, but not I think of being 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 mean that at very least the Church’s claims merit the world’s 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.

We warm even more when such courage is shown for the sake of others – the “Fukushima Fifty” who have kept going back into Japan’s toxic power plant because it’s their duty; that kid in the Queensland floods who said save my brother before me; Jesus entering Jerusalem for a confrontation he knew could end only one way.

Such bravery makes us all look up and 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 religious word games about God – or, for that matter, people who play 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 Baghdad and Benghazi 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 and for me. Going on. Undaunted. Unconquered. Unstoppable. To the end.

And beyond.

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