

Palm Sunday evening 2024

St Michael and All Angels, Tidenham Chase, 2024

Various readings.

O thou, Master Carpenter of Nazareth,
Who on the Cross in wood and iron wrought our whole salvation,
Wield well, we pray thee, thy tools in this thy workshop,
So that we who come rough-hewn to thy bench
May by thy touch be fashioned into a truer beauty
And a greater usefulness;
We ask it in thy Name. Amen.

Everything has been heading for this moment. That's the message that we hear in scripture this evening, as we meet on the first day of Holy Week. This morning in church we heard the story of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the back of the donkey, heralded by the excited crowd who waved branches in his honour and threw their cloaks down before him.

But Christ is, of course, riding to his death. Whether the crowd knew that, on that first Palm Sunday, is doubtful. Perhaps some of the chief priests, the religious leaders who have so long wanted shot of him - perhaps some of them are rubbing their hands together and thinking, 'yes, now we can get him?' The Roman leadership probably haven't even heard of this Jesus yet - though by the end of the week one of them, Pontus Pilate, will have his name immortalized as the one under whom Jesus suffered. We are just about to say his name in the Creed, two thousand years after this otherwise unremarkable local government official died. But for two thousand years the church has been declaring that Christ 'suffered under Pontius Pilate' - it's the only human proper name in the Creed. It's a curious thought.

Tim Rice's song that he puts into the mouth of Pontius Pilate in *Jesus Christ Superstar* has that rather haunting line in it: 'Then I saw thousands of millions crying for this man; and then I heard them mentioning my name, and leaving me the blame.'

But as unaware as any of these human actors might be of where all this is going to end, one week later, the whole economy of heaven knows full well. The readings we are hearing this afternoon are some of those that foreshadow this great week. Joseph, as he is dying, knows that there will come a return from Egypt, that God's plan for his people is more generous and loving and hopeful than they could possibly imagine. That they, that we, are going to be called home. Not to a physical country - and that's probably quite an important thing to say as we watch the unfolding horror in Gaza - but home to the fullness of the Kingdom of God.

In the desert the people look up to the bronze serpent on its pole, and receive healing - and on Good Friday God's people will look upward to the Cross, as we do this week, this evening, having discovered that in all the ways in which it really matters, it is the Cross that heals us; that makes us whole. So two thousand years later, we will turn to face it in worship in just a moment or two.

Jonah, in spiritual death in the depths of the whale's belly for three days and nights, emerged into the light again as a sign, or a promise, that the darkness is not where it ends. That we too, even when it feels the bleakest, are heading for the daylight. Dry, dead bones will be reanimated by the breath of Easter as it rustles in the garden on the first day of the week.

It is as if all of creation history has been waiting for this week. For this sequence of events into which we now enter. All of those stories, images and signs have been stories, images and signs of Christ, as he enters the city, eats with his friends in the upper room, shoulders his cross and staggers towards the green hill far away without the city wall. And it is on that journey we are invited to enter again, as we do

every year. Because even though it is the same story every year, it is also new every year, because God's eternity meets our humanity, our fragility, and our mortality, and that is different every year, every day. So although this might be your 10th, 50th, 80th journey through Holy Week, it will be different from every one of those preceding journeys. Because you are different. Because I am different to last year. And God's unchanging eternal mercy knows that, and so we receive what we need each time.

I hope you will engage as deeply as you can in the various opportunities for worship this week, starting on Wednesday with a communion service at St Luke's on the day when we remember Judas betraying Christ for money, and we ponder on our own capacity to surrender our principles. And then into the events of Maundy Thursday evening, through into the walk to the cross on Good Friday, and eventually to the kindling of a new flame as Easter day arrives.

There are two readings still to come this evening. The first, in a few minutes, is from chapter 3 of the Gospel according to St John, that very famous passage that includes the words, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son Jesus Christ so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.' The words in the verse before that, we will hear, pick up on the story of the serpent on the pole, as St John makes the connection with that event in the desert so many hundreds of years beforehand, and identifies the crucifixion as the moment of ultimate, of true, healing. It is through this death that God will show how much he loves the world.

And then just before the blessing, the final reading from the first letter to the Corinthians: and it is there, at the end of this service, that we hear the promise that is waiting at the end of this week. What is going to happen to Jesus Christ has to do what is going to happen to us. As Christ descends into the darkness on Good Friday, he goes, in some indescribable and mysterious way, into all of our darkness as

well. And that means that when he emerges from that darkness, on Easter Day, we are raised with him. As St Paul puts it, 'as was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.'

This is St Paul at his most confident. We will also bear the image of the man of heaven. And that image of course, we understand, to be about our baptism. The cross of Christ that is marked on us at our beginnings is the cross upon which our salvation is wrought. And Christ's descent into hell, and then ascent out into Easter Day is mirrored in the water of the font. We go down into the darkness to rise up again.

Eternal truths will be proclaimed again this week. Eternal truths that have the power to completely change our lives. Eternal truths which will sustain us over the coming months in the inevitable uncertainty that any vacancy will bring to our parish. Eternal truths which mean that we don't need to wait until next Sunday to 'crown [Christ] Lord of all', hence the hymn I have chosen for us to finish with.

John Chrysostom, that great Father of the church, said this: 'my dear people, the cross has achieved all these wonderful things for us. The Cross is a war memorial erected against the demons, a sword raised against sin... the Cross is the Father's will, the glory of the only begotten, and the Spirit's exhortation. It is the beauty of the Angels and the Guardian of the church. Paul gloried in the cross of Christ, for indeed it is the rampart of the saints and the light of the whole world.'

Amen.

