

Holy Covenant Sermon
29th March 2015

Palm Sunday Gospel is the whole passion story from Mark chapters 14 and 15.

PAUSE

So Jesus died, crucified on a cross. He was killed for blasphemy, for having claimed before the High Priest that he is the Messiah, the Son of God Most High. Before Pilate, Jesus did not say “I am King of the Jews” He merely said: ”You say so”. And Pilate did say so – in writing on the cross.

And as Jesus died the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom – there is now no separation between humans and God. All can see into the Holy of Holies and all can go there and be in God’s presence forgiven and free.

Three characters stand out in this story – who all love and support Jesus in their various ways. The first is the unknown woman who anoints him for burial with very expensive ointment. When the disciples complain at the waste, Jesus says: “Let her alone, the poor you always have with you, you can show kindness to them whenever you wish. You will not always have me. Wherever the good news is proclaimed, what she has done will be told in memory of her”.

The second is Peter – he fails twice – he goes to sleep in the garden when Jesus needs support, he denies he knows Jesus when the servants ask but when the cock cries he weeps bitterly. The transformed Peter will do great things in Jesus’ Name.

Thirdly we have Joseph of Arimathea who asks Pilate for Jesus’ body, treats it reverently, wrapping it in a linen cloth, laying it in a tomb hewn out of the rock and rolling a stone against the entrance. I’m glad at this point that Jesus was anointed earlier as nothing is happening now.

We always hear the whole Passion story at the beginning of Holy Week to prepare us in this last week of Lent for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and the great celebration of resurrection on Easter Sunday.

The hymns this morning have been so well chosen to complement the readings – all the themes of Palm Sunday.

First – Ride on ride on in Majesty echoes the reading from Mark which we heard outside. As he enters Jerusalem everyone is calling “Hosanna in the highest, blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord”. Hosanna means ‘Save us’. It’s the imperative of the Hebrew verb ‘to save’, from which also the name ‘Jesus’ comes . What the pilgrims are shouting are verses 25 and 26 of Psalm 118.

\ Many people had seen Jesus’ miracles and heard his teaching and were hoping he would come to the temple at Passover time. Jesus did come, not as a king on a warhorse or in a

chariot but as a peaceable king on a donkey colt just as the prophet Zachariah had predicted. His entry into Jerusalem was a deliberate and dramatic claim to be Messiah yet he didn't say a single word. We, who know the story, are very conscious of what will happen to him later in the week. That's why we read the Passion narrative today – from Mark's Gospel.

Second we sang that wonderful hymn “At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow”. It's a summary of our Philippians reading.

I suggest you go home and study this passage again but start from verse 1 of Philippians chapter 2. Paul says to the church “Make my joy complete, be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord with one another – Do nothing from selfish ambition, be humble”.

Then we read this wonderful “Christ Hymn” celebrating Christ's humble emptying into human form and then his exaltation to heavenly Lordship. Let me read part of it again:

“He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave – and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

So God highly exalted him - so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow - and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Then Verse 1 of TIS 231

We saw in the Gospel that Jesus was called a king at his trial and death, we also saw that this understanding has been used to create Jesus in an image that justifies power. Today we see that Jesus is best understood as a slave – a reference to Isaiah's servant songs perhaps – and as he is lifted high on the cross our only response can be to fall on our knees and worship him.

Read verse 3 of hymn

We sang “Lift high the cross” two weeks ago. It connects with that story in John 3 of Jesus being lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness – “So must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life”. The hymn celebrates the sign of the cross put on our forehead at baptism and the nations coming from afar, gathering around the cross to worship and adore him and sing his praises. At its most stark connection it takes us back to the Passion narrative where we saw Jesus breathe his last. This is of course the meaning of it all.

There's an unfinished feel about today. (show picture of feet) These feet remind us of the procession into Jerusalem – many people waving palms and chanting “Hosanna. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in highest heaven!” Jesus, the humble peaceful king riding on a donkey. The feet also remind us of the last supper, Jesus taking the role of the slave on Thursday evening washing the disciples' feet.

In our last hymn, my favourite, "Lord of the dance", we've left off the last verse. At the end of the service we will be left with Jesus stripped, whipped and hung up high then "They buried my body and they'd thought I'd gone, but I am the dance and I still go on".

May we all have a truly holy week as we ponder these things and worship in our own way. God bless those of you who will march for refugees in Garema Place, Jesus is with you.

Some of us will meet at worship during the week and then may we worship on Easter Day with great joy to celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord from the dead.