

Palm Sunday 2020

worship on Zoom hosted by Rev. Alan Stewart

Welcome, everyone – if you can hear me, wave!

It's great, again, to be together while apart.

Our church buildings may have closed but the Church, of course is us, and my prayer is that, wherever you are, that place will be holy to you.

You'll, I hope, have had time to see details of some of the Holy Week services etc. Zoom details will be sent out in emails. This is a steep learning curve for me, so bear with any glitches...

Those who knew our dear friend Joan Beagles will, I hope, know by now that Joan's funeral will be on Wednesday 15 April at 9.30am. I will be the only person there, but I'm encouraging friends and family to light a candle for Joan at that time.

In this time of communion, I encourage all who would like to to share in bread and wine, or something similar, where you are when the time comes.

By the magic of PowerPoint, all the words will come up on the screen, so no need of any words.

Hopefully, some of you will have last year's palm crosses – in a few moments, we'll be blessing those crosses.

But, first, let's take a moment just to be still, to remember that Christ is here.

Palm Sunday begins with Jesus entering the holy city to a hero's welcome. His chosen mode of transport is both deliberate and provocative. Anyone who knew anything about Jewish scriptures knew about Zechariah's prophecy: 'Your king comes to you... humble and riding on a donkey'. Up until then, he'd actually been fairly guarded about the whole Messiah thing. But now, in the most public way possible, Jesus is saying, 'The rumours are true, yours truly is the king you've been waiting for; your Messiah'.

Now, the Roman occupation was particularly twitchy at this time of year. During Passover, the city was a tinderbox of frustrated nationalism and political egos; and the irony of this particular festival, of course, was that it was a celebration of God's deliverance from an oppressive superpower; Egypt. And now, yet again, this chosen nation, God's own people, are living under a cruel and foreign regime.

So, when this 'Messiah' turns up, entourage in tow, the crowds go crazy; strip branches to wave like flags, red carpet the road with their coats, sing their hosannas.

This was big news - a whole nation's hopes and dreams were pinned on this. Their Messiah would be the one who would restore the fortunes of Israel, install the rule of God; overthrow the oppressors.

So, all eyes are on this Jesus, especially those of the religious elite, who were quite comfortable, thank you very much, with the measure of power Rome had delegated to them. If this Pretender King fuelled a revolution, there was no knowing how hard the Romans would come down. Better, they concluded, one man die rather than a whole nation suffer.

Fast forward just a few days, and the whole atmosphere has changed. Once again, their 'King' is paraded through the city streets, this time bound and beaten, to cries of 'crucify!'.

We don't know, of course, if these were the same people who welcomed him less than a week before. It's likely that the religious leaders had their own rent-a-mob, but it strikes me there's a very human dynamic here. En-masse we are all too easily manipulated and swayed by rhetoric, too easily rallied against a 'common threat'.

And Jesus was a threat, certainly to the religious status quo, but actually for the majority... he was more of a disappointment.

He just wasn't the Messiah they'd signed up for. Most expected some kind of political or armed uprising at the very least; people wanted action.

Disappointment, I imagine, is something we're all too familiar with, not least in these unparalleled days.

Writing just a few weeks back as the world was going into shutdown, the American stand-up-turned-pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber posted that this is 'also a pandemic of human disappointment; cancelled trips, art openings, sporting events, book tours, concerts; things folks have been planning for, working towards, and excited about. That's a lot of grieving on top of the sickness'.

Disappointment, as Nadia says, is a kind of grief; a grief for what could've, should've been.

So, what particular grief might you have experienced in these days? Take a moment of silence to reflect on that, to share that with God, if you can.

On that first Palm Sunday, as Jesus received the adulation of the crowds, he must have known that many of these smiling

faces were projecting their own agendas onto him; he must have known that his closest friends would soon bail out; he must have known that this was the beginning of the end; the signing of his own death warrant. And yet, when the celebrations strike up and the Pharisees kick off, Jesus replies, 'Silence these guys, and the stones themselves will raise anthems to God!'

Despite all that he was carrying, Jesus was able to be present to that moment of joy, however misplaced it was. Despite all that he was carrying, Jesus was able to praise God. And there is, I think, deep wisdom here.

Choosing to worship in spite of how we are feeling, choosing to be present to God and to the moment we're in, is as good an antidote to disappointment as any.

Because, like prayer, worship changes us, brings us into a new place where we begin to see differently. Living in the moment can release us from the tyranny of disappointment – because in the moment, we discover that this moment, that we, that our God actually... is enough.

If you find this *being present* difficult then you're in good company, we all do; we're all constantly elsewhere in our thoughts.

There are a few pointers and a short video on the websites which might just help [look for Mindfulness].

Worship incorporates all the season of our lives. It's not only about praise or wonder or thankfulness, worship is also sometimes lament.

And we see, as Jesus nears the city gates, suddenly his joy turns to grief as he mourns how this city had refused again and again to listen to God.

And in *his* disappointment, Jesus wept.

You'll know that we cannot fast-track grief or prematurely resolve it. Grief needs expression; must have its time, and we must sit with it until its work is done.

On these Thursday evenings when we've been filling our streets with the sound of applause and gratitude for our extraordinary NHS, Rachel had this lovely idea to deliver bubbles to the families on our Close. It's something she came across in the hospital where her father spent his last days, when the chaplain blew bubbles to symbolise all that is unsaid and undone, all that cannot be captured by words; all the sorrow, all the gratitude; all the joy.

Perhaps, like me, you long for that day when, like the first Palm Sunday, we leave our homes and party in the streets; when once again we embrace; share a coffee; break bread with those around us.

That day will come, and it will be full of celebration, but it will also be a day to grieve. These Palm Crosses are symbols that hold together both celebration (the palm) and lament (the cross). And we will need to celebrate all that we have found in these days; the kindnesses, the gratitude; new perspectives; new connections; new ways of living, a new and better normal, we hope, but we will also need to lament and grieve for all that we and others have lost.

When this is over, our world, our church, we will be different because of how we spent these days of enforced retreat and isolation. Speaking personally, I think it will be too easy to revert to my old ways, so can we take a moment then to ask ourselves what promises we will make to ourselves and to God about living differently?

Before Chris prays for us, I'd like on behalf of us all to blow some bubbles for everything lost, everything found; everything that words cannot express.

Palm Sunday Reading: Luke 19. 28-41

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say, 'The Lord needs it.'"

Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

They replied, "The Lord needs it."

They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

"I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it.