

Palm Sunday - 05.04.20

Sermon by Rev'd Stephen Monsieigneur

A lot has changed in the five weeks of Lent 2020 and I suspect that like me, many are of the view that they have sacrificed more than was planned.

Today is Palm Sunday, the Sunday of the Passion, the Sunday that marks the end of lent and the beginning of the holiest week of the Christian faith. But this is not the typical Palm Sunday we are accustomed too or were expecting. The arrival of COVID-19 has threatened humanity in a way that few of us can honestly say we have experienced in our lives before. When celebrating Shrove Tuesday then Ash Wednesday five or so weeks ago who would have imagined the turn of events that see us as individuals and community where we are today.

Today, Christian services across the world would typically begin with the blessing and dispersal of palm crosses as a symbol and constant reminder of Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem where he was greeted with shouts of hosanna and the laying of a carpet of palms; but the celebration is countered as the tone changes from one of celebration to one of despair and anger. We become disillusioned when Jesus apparently fails to stack up to our expectation. Even the twelve turn their backs on Jesus in various ways. Such is this change that the service which began with such celebration ends with us, the crowd, calling for Jesus death in the words "Crucify him, crucify him."

As I prepared this sermon, the specter of COVID-19 has hung like a dark cloud, impeding the light that would make seeing easier. Today's Palm Sunday is not typical. The very fact that we are unable to gather as our tradition has dictated for centuries at this holiest time is for me to say the least, frustrating, a feeling I suspect many others share.

It is easy to become melancholy, to question why God allowed this to happen. In the words of Psalm 137 to call out "How shall we sing the Lords song in a strange land?" I have already heard some people refer to the COVID-19 virus as divine punishment for turning away from God and scripture, for how we live, a view to which I do not subscribe.

The prayer of the day beautifully sums up the meaning of today. God is tender and loving of the human race so much so that the debt that only humanity could pay was paid by Jesus God's Son who in the words of Paul to the Philippians "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." In other word's Jesus being the human image of God was human in every way and so was required to trust God as we are all called to trust God. The prayer goes on to highlight the greatness of Gods love and mercy. A love and mercy so great that Jesus was risen from the dead, for humanity the permanence, the sting of death was no more. Rather through faith in the life of Jesus, resurrected life with god was our again.

As we come to terms with the challenges of closed church buildings, inability to gather in the same space for worship and prayer, we have a choice. We can move forward feeling as though we are turning our backs on God out of fear of the virus, or we can see the virus as just another experience in our existence that can be used to draw us even deeper into relationship with Jesus. Just this week Bishop Michael Curry (Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church) wrote.

“We find in the strange position of fasting from physical gathering for worship... not out of sloth or disobedience, but in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.” He adds, “In the context of the coronavirus pandemic [COVID-19], refraining from physically gathering together to hear God’s holy word and receiving the sacraments of holy communion is itself an act of love for God and our neighbor.”

We must remember that life in our human context has always served us with joys and sorrows, it always will, it is through the challenges of such experiences that we are able to grow and know God better in our lives. This was the message Jesus was trying to get his audience to understand. But they were looking for a warrior a leader who would lead a rebellion that would free the Jewish people from occupation. Jesus was not saying or doing what they wanted to receive. They lost faith letting fear dictate, albeit for some temporarily.

The challenge for us as followers of Jesus is to allow our faith in him to strengthen us when it appears pointless. To let him lead when we cannot see the path. Trust when all is good is not trust: no, trust is what we require when we do not have the answer. This was something not only Judas Iscariot, but all the disciples failed to understand at some point over the next few days. It was our failure to do this, to trust God that allowed evil to cloud our view, to impair our judgement and caused us to turn from Jesus, to call for his death in our life.

Ever since Monday, March 23 when all places of worship were ordered to close, I have found myself in a new kind of sacred space. A new reality where my perspective on the celebration of Easter is challenged and takes on greater meaning. It is more tangible simply because the traditional activities have been taken away and I am more aware of God’s presence around me. COVID-19 while an unwelcome deliverer of challenges in almost every aspect of our lives and as a source of hardship that cannot be ignored, has also provided an opportunity for us to slow down and reflect. To explore what really have been our priorities over the years as we celebrate Easter.

This Easter as we move forward let our hearts be open to God’s mercy our minds to divine wisdom and our spirit to the peace only available through submission to Jesus. Let us continue to use the technologies and other assets made possible by the gift of curiosity, inquisitiveness and intelligence used to facilitate the life of our church in new formats, there are many questions yet to answer moving forward, but let’s see Easter 2020 not as the year our faith or church were damaged but rather the year we were reborn.