

SERMON FOR PALM SUNDAY 2023

By Jonathan Poston

So today is Palm Sunday and the start of our Holy Week.

We've just heard the long Passion Narrative that The Church of England puts into our liturgy today too. As well as the Palm Gospel read out at St Mary's before we left.

In the Passion narrative we hear the story of some of Jesus's terrible experiences as part of that incredible journey of kingly self-sacrifice. We listen to that story today for the benefit of those of you who won't be able to get to church during the week, because next Sunday of course is Resurrection Sunday with Easter, but the Passion happens in real time over the long weekend run up to that, particularly with Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

I strongly recommend that if you want the full Easter experience, that you come to Maundy Thursday evening 7.30pm, the last hour at 2pm on Good Friday and the Easter Vigil at 8.00pm on Saturday. In this way we share, in a very real way, the journey with Jesus and his disciples

But today, Palm Sunday is Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the beginning of his journey to death and resurrection. The beginning of his task to change the world forever. Up until now he'd avoided Jerusalem and was often heard to say to his disciples and those he encountered – tell no one of who I am.

The time had to be right. And he had to be in control of that time and to decide when he needed to go to fulfil the divine plan.

For he knows that he is going to go into Jerusalem to stir the pot.

On Palm Sunday Jesus enters into the crucible of Holy Week by entering the city of Jerusalem. He starts the process. He has deliberately come out from the smaller town of Bethlehem into the spiritual centre and busy city of Jerusalem. The time has come for him, to bring the last three years of his mission to its conclusion.

It's important to realise that Holy Week as we experience it is a continually occurring event, not something that happened a long time ago.

It is like our Eucharist which plugs us into the spiritual reality of the Last Supper.

We are not celebrating an historical event – with the Eucharist we are re-membering, giving body to, the living reality of what happened with Jesus and his disciples. We re-live it with him and with them in our present moment. And so it is with Holy Week.

Holy Week is the meeting and the collision of the old world and the new. It is the point in time of the old Judaic theology dying, and the new – what we call Christian – theology being born. It is the move from fundamentalism to freedom.

A move from a time when the priestly caste said what was true and the common person was expected to fall in line with it, to a liberation into personal freedom and individual connection with God.

As Jesus came into Jerusalem and they spread palms at his feet thinking he would liberate them, he WAS exactly what they thought he was. But he was also much more than that. He was to liberate them in a way that was unimaginable and would have far more consequences than they could possibly conceive.

Later on they would see his passiveness, and surrender to the authorities, as weakness and failure, and they would add to the voices yelling for him to be crucified. They would feel betrayed by him – but that is because they could not possibly understand the astounding spiritual events taking place.

Christ was indeed the Messiah and he was also a powerful insurgent. A deep agitator of the status quo – but this was to be something far more than just political. The crucifixion was to become a fulcrum in time from the old way to the new.

The expression of God's truth would no longer be the old way: worked out in the world through us collectively under authority; but by the new way: all of us individually, through a personal relationship with the divine; and Holy Week for us is a drama of power that connects us to that fulcrum point of change.

And the connecting of Holy Week and Easter to this time of year is no accident either.

In the Western church, as we follow the Gregorian Calendar in the West, we celebrate Easter on the first Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox.

Why do we do that?

Well this coincides with when the sun too is at a fulcrum point, the equinox when day and night are equal. It also coincides with a full moon when the sun and moon are opposite each other with the earth in between. And it coincides with the annual surge in new growth, where life bursts out of its earthly tomb.

It too is a fulcrum point

So

A change over is happening in the planets.

A change over is happening in nature.

And a change over is happening in our own souls.

If we key ourselves in to all these things it gives us an opportunity to assimilate the shadow side of our selves that we have been offering to God for healing during Lent, and to rebirth ourselves in Christ's resurrection for OUR life over the year ahead.

It is a time of procreative power for new potential. And that includes US for our lives.

Jesus's story is not something 'out there' for us to look at or to study objectively. It is a story that we are called to take into ourselves for personal transformation.

It is what in the Eastern church they call Theosis - a transformative process whose aim is likeness to or union with our God.

Make no mistake. This mystery will challenge us, both intellectually and emotionally.

And yet the events that take us to the shocking tableau of the crucifixion and the surprising scenes of empty tomb and resurrection are keys to divine revelation and make the Christian Gospel message so extraordinarily surprising and overwhelming and divine.

God has completely transformed history. This is not a religious belief but an unequivocal divine act that occurred historically and continues to occur for us to connect with spiritually. As Christians this is not a time of year for trying to make our Gospel safe.

We tend to make Christmas safe – even though it isn't – but we need to let Easter speak for itself.

Palm Sunday with its palm leaves of the sun celebrates something of the old sun worship. But the physical sun goes down at the end of the day and dies in the west. Easter Sunday at the end of Holy Week will celebrate the day of the new sun, the spiritual sun. The old sun is no more.

This spiritual sun does not set. It is steadfast and enduring: for Christ WILL transform death into new life.

In Holy Week these are some of the ways in which God speaks to us in a poetic and profound way.

Join us for the journey. Share the Last Supper, the footwashing, the stripping of the altar and the vigil on Thursday. Join us for the final hour leading up to the crucifixion and the great sacrifice of love on Good Friday. Celebrate the new light coming into our darkened church on Holy Saturday evening. And feel these things speaking to your soul and making holy transformations within you.

In this way you can truly own the joy of Easter Sunday and the resurrection, which comes to meet us and showers us with grace despite ourselves. Amen.