

Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2018  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent - Year B - Passion Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a  
Psalm 31:9-18  
Philippians 2:5-11  
Mark 12:1-8

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

There is profound tension in Palm Sunday. We have a brief but haunting burst of sunshine as Jesus is surrounded by the crowds, waving palm branches and songs of praise to God. Yet the storm clouds are quickly gathering. There's a brooding sense of impending tragedy as Jesus stops his descent from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem and weeps like a broken hearted lover.

Many poets have tried to capture the profound tension. One attempt which speaks to me is Clive Sansom's poem, 'The Donkey's Owner', in which he compares the pompous entry of Pilate to Jerusalem one day followed by the arrival of Jesus the next morning. Let me read it to you... The Donkey's Owner.

Snaffled my donkey, he did --- good luck to him!  
Rode him astride, feet dangling, near scraping the ground  
Gave me the laugh of my life when I first saw him,  
Remembering yesterday --- you know, how Pilate come  
Bouncing the same road, on that horse of his  
Big as a house and the armour shining  
And half of Rome trotting behind him. Tight mouthed he was  
Looking as if he owned the world.

Then today,  
Him and my little donkey! Ha! Laugh ---?  
I thought I'd kill myself when he first started.

So did the rest of them. Gave him a cheer  
Like he was Caesar himself, only more hearty:  
Tore off some palm twigs and followed shouting,  
Whacking the donkey's behind .....Then suddenly  
We see his face.  
The smile had gone, and somehow the way he sat  
Was different --- like he was much older --- you know ---  
Didn't want to laugh no more.

Powerful stuff. At first the donkey's owner thinks it's a just a laugh, but when he sees the face of Jesus, something profound spears at his heart: "Didn't want to laugh no more."

Indeed there is something both gloriously joyful and awesomely bitter about this day. Are we, in fact, looking into the mystery of the heart of God? How does God hold infinite sorrow and infinite joy together? The lectionary readings for today helps us live with the tension.

We started with the passage from Isaiah ( 50:4-9a) which is the third of the so-called 'servant songs'- the poems about the true servant of God whose willing suffering will become deeply redemptive. Here is a brief glimpse of a noble person whose back is bared for a flogging, and whose beard is ripped out by the handful, and, he says:

I did not hide my face from shame and spitting.

Then comes the Psalm (31:9-16), where there is a similar mood of impending suffering, although without Isaiah's remarkable concept of redemption.

For I have heard the whispering of the mob. Fears are all around me. They put their heads together against me, they conspire to take my life.

This grim scene is followed by the Epistle (Philippians 2: 5-11). These sentences are most likely a section from an early Christian hymn, sung in honour of their Christ. It sings of a Jesus who does not make a grab for power, but bends low like Isaiah's suffering servant, accepting mutilation and a cruel death.

You may think this is all very gloomy stuff. But that is not how it reads in the Scriptures. There is no despair here. Hope rules. We are taken close to the pulsing, passionate Centre of existence, to the heart of God, where we find redemption at work through willing self-sacrifice. It is a thing of unsurpassed beauty that such a sublime Love should give itself for healing a diseased and broken world.

This is the path to the only genuine new age; to the only sustainable new heaven and new earth. This is true love, not that we loved God but that God loved us, and gave Christ to be the remedy for our brokenness.

Of course, the teeming world around us does not admit this. It wants to save itself by clutching at life, hoarding it, grabbing all that one can, treading on other heads to get more than our share. Looking after number one, feverishly possessing, mastering, exploiting. Yet with every fierce grab they lose more than they gain.

There are frenetic people everywhere chasing the big lie. Sadly, in what they think will be gaining richer life, is found much less; spiritual poverty, futility; despair; darkness.

Yet here in the Gospel we have the Man from Nazareth (secretly and not-so-secretly at times, many of our secular contemporaries see him as an impractical fool) riding on a donkey with his long legs almost touching the ground. "Lose your life and you will find it," he is acting out, ready to go to the bitter end.

Palm Sunday begins the last Act in the drama of purest Love, love in the jaws of humiliation. Like most of the profound moments of life, it is joy mixed with tears.

Here is the irony of Palm Sunday: Christ's grief takes place in a celebration that, on the surface, looks like the most triumphant day of his life. We are delighted that for once in Jesus' experience, this man is given the treatment he deserved. We want to join the cheering and the waving of palms. And we do.

But always there is the tension. Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday. Happiness allied with profound grief; our joy in the Saviour, his sorrow over that which is lost and doomed.

Today we are close to the final frontier; to that Divine Mystery who brought us into being and follows us through all the hours of life. Close to that Lover who cannot bear that even the least person should perish. The Christ who wept over Jerusalem weeps over us, and himself is the weeping of God.

Tension. Laughter and weeping. Trumpet and then the plaintive oboe. God's redemptive suffering. Hosanna! Followed by a solemn prelude to "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

As the owner of the donkey in Clive Samsom's poem concludes:

Then suddenly

We see his face.

The smile had gone, and somehow the way he sat

Was different --- like he was much older --- you know ---

Didn't want to laugh no more.

The Lord be with you...