

Sixth Sunday in Lent - Passion Sunday
Year C - 14/4/2019

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:3-14

John 12:1-8

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

One of the simplest ways to engage with a gospel story is to ask, 'If I was there when this happened, who would I be and where would I be standing?' ... So on Palm Sunday 2019, where am I in this gospel?

Assuming that I'm not the donkey... and knowing that I'm not Jesus... that leaves three choices... I'm either a disciple... or one of the crowd... or heaven-forbid, one of the grumbling Pharisees.

I'd like to see myself as a disciple - especially as I know that's what every Christian is called to be. But... if a disciple is one who has left everything in order to follow Jesus... then I'm kidding myself. I flirt with being a disciple, but I'm nowhere near to living that lifestyle.

No... I'd be one of the crowd... Happy to be there... maybe even standing towards the front... Attracted to Jesus and his teaching... hoping that all he promises will prove true... And happy to shout out with the throng... songs of praise and honour. As I stand here today, I've no doubt that Jesus is Lord and Saviour, and I'm happy to join the rest of the crowd in saying it right out loud.

In fact I was built for this. The church culture I grew up in, taught me that the crowd is the honourable and the best place to be - that is, to be involved, to 'attend'... but not be fanatical. That was the Anglican way of my childhood... and we looked down on those more enthusiastic 'cousins' in other denominations. It's right and proper to stay in the crowd... for it's safer there.

Even the clergy said it from the pulpit... 'You don't want to get too carried away!' So on Sunday, we'd come together and sing our praises of Jesus... and then go home, 'warmed and comforted', to our regular lives, to what we called the real world... That's how I was taught to be a Christian. Respectability was in the crowd.

And a happy good natured crowd is a wonderful place to be. I remember many wonderful years of Carols by Candlelight; Football Park on a night when the Crows were going well... It's the experience of the Palm Sunday Crowd - happy and celebratory.

But crowds aren't always happy... and they can turn quickly. I spoke once to someone who was there at Adelaide Oval for the Bodyline Test... when Bert Oldfield was felled... and he said the stories are all true. That if one person had jumped the fence, they all would have gone... and murder would have been done that day.

I remember reading about Vietnam marches that started peacefully, and then through the manipulation of a few, turned so very quickly into a maelstrom of hate and violence. Even a football crowd when their team is disappointing expectations... how easy it is for the crowd - that had arrived happy - how easily when things go wrong they turn on a scapegoat, generally the umpire but sometimes the coach, and turned into a seething mob of insults, threats and hate.

Crowds are easily changed... easily manipulated... because at the end of the day, they're not really committed to anything but meeting their own needs and desires. And has been noted many times, this happy Palm Sunday Crowd, that sings Jesus' praises, this crowd that I'm part of, will be back on the streets in just 5 days' time... screaming 'Crucify him'!

Today we acclaim Jesus as the saviour, the answer to all our needs... but by Friday... after some strategic manipulation by the Temple elite, Jesus is the problem... the scapegoat... the one who let us all down and must be eliminated. Same Jesus... same crowd... but a very different mood.

So although the crowd is a fine place to be on Palm Sunday... I do not want to be in this crowd on Good Friday. None of us would choose that! There is no person here who would ever call out 'Crucify him!'

So what would I do on Good Friday... when the crowd is called out onto the streets again? If I did go, would I have the courage to call out in favour of Jesus? And if I did, would I keep calling when I saw the crowd was against me... or would I shut up and melt away... comforting myself with the reassurance, "Well at least I tried." ... But most likely... I'd probably just stay home in the first place... frightened... keep my head down... play it safe.

That's the trouble with being one of the crowd. At the end of the day, it's a place of non-commitment... a place of fence-sitting... a bet each way. If things go wrong... get too hard... I can always melt away... back to my old life... In fact that's exactly what many of us do. For all our attraction to Jesus, we keep at least one leg firmly grounded in what we call the real world. If it gets too challenging or scary with Jesus, we can always go back to safety there... melt back into the crowd.

Now that's not as dramatic as shouting 'Crucify', but it is a repudiation of Christ Jesus... and it's my way of staying in the crowd.

Today's invitation is clear. God is calling me to step out of the non-committal crowd and join the disciples. To actually be committed in a whole-hearted way to follow Jesus as my Lord and Saviour... wherever that takes me.

To move from being a spectator... an attender... to being a participant in the action. Now... if you're swayed by this, and you're thinking you might hear a similar invitation... then be very careful... stop for a moment and consider. For we know where Jesus is going... He's going to the cross. His path is the way of life through death.

So if you are considering it, recognise the risk... and the fear attached. I feel it keenly... but in my heart there's also excitement and even a hint of joy... because deep down it is where I really want to be. Deep down, I know this is the only way I'm ever going to be free.

Well... there's an obvious weakness in this sermon. Undoubtedly more than one, but the one I was thinking of was the black-and-white assumption of a 'once and for all decision'. As if this faith journey of ours is a neat, tidy chronological line. But it's more like a spiral. There are days when even I choose to live as a disciple... before I get scared and run back again. We all come by this place and this decision many times. And if I say YES today, it won't be the first time in my life... and it won't be the last.

Wherever we are, the invitation every Palm Sunday is to choose to follow Christ more courageously... more faithfully... more wholeheartedly... with more trust... more commitment... more reckless desperation (perhaps).

Yes it is risky to step out of the crowd... But there's no life to be had back there. As scary as this Christ journey through death and resurrection is, it's the only hope we have. It's where life awaits us.

The Lord be with you.