

Homily – 05-04-20 – Palm Sunday

Readings: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 Matthew
21:1-11

This weekend is Palm Sunday and it begins what many Churches call Holy Week. But this Palm Sunday is different to any before because the Federal government has quite rightly directed church buildings to be closed until further notice. Along with sports and entertainment venues, church buildings have been closed to reduce the risk of Corona Virus spreading in our community.

So, even if we were geographically close enough to go to church a congregation will not be gathered there. This does not mean that people will not be praying, singing, and drawing strength from the wisdom found in Bible readings because they will. But they will be doing these things in their homes and not in church buildings.

We find ourselves in a strange season when only ten people can gather for a funeral, and only five attend a wedding. A season in which Baptisms, Confirmations, and even Holy Communion is on hold for at least three months.... and quite possibly longer.

'Though hard and strange I think there is potential for all of us to grow in our faith. For us to care for others and pray together with them... on the phone and online. For us to spend time becoming more familiar with parts of the Bible and through discussion with others grow in our understanding... on the phone and online. For those many current and future conversations on the phone there is opportunity for God's grace to be given and received.

We are not yet in full lockdown but the restrictions already in place feel a bit oppressive! Our friends and family can't come over in the way that they formally could; and those in essential services need to be particularly careful. The sobering queues outside Centre Link offices throughout the nation are reminders that only one third of the workforce can work from home, so there is already a world of pain in our community.

Bearing these things in mind we come to the very familiar Gospel of Palm Sunday which describes Jesus entering Jerusalem riding a donkey. It was a few days before the Passover, arguably the most significant religious festival of Jewish faith. In the rituals of Passover Jewish people give thanks to God for delivering them from slavery in Egypt. So, in the context of our Gospel Jewish pilgrims from all over the known world would have poured into Jerusalem and there would have been significant crowds.

At the time Palestine was a small, but strategically important, country that had been invaded and taken over by the Roman Empire. It was an occupied territory with garrisons of soldiers strategically located to enforce Roman law and punish rebellion. To survive Jewish political and religious leadership accepted and worked with the Roman administration, but many in the Jewish community looked back to a time when a King called David led them. When David was king they were a free people who were both respected and feared.

Jewish prophets through the centuries had promised that God would give them another king - like David - who would make Israel great again. So, as the Jewish pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem people would have discussed what Jesus had been doing over the previous three years. For his teaching had

challenged the legalistic interpretation of Torah promoted by the Pharisees and challenged the narrow focus on worship and sacrifice promoted by the Sadducees. By itself this would have had little credibility... but people would also have talked about all who had been healed, together with the miracles that had been witnessed. Clearly Jesus was someone with God given authority.

Matthew's Gospel remembers the crowds throwing their cloaks on the ground and waving palm branches while shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! ...Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Now many of our hymns and songs use the word 'Hosanna!' and I think immediately of the Sunday school favourite 'Give me oil in my lamp!' which has the refrain, 'Sing Hosanna! Sing Hosanna! Sing Hosanna to the King of Kings!' But this easy familiarity potentially limits our understanding of the word 'Hosanna' for Hosanna is a powerful Aramaic word meaning, 'Save (or, help) us!'

It would have been risky for those crowds to be calling out 'Hosanna!' to an itinerant Jewish teacher and to call him king for it could easily have been interpreted as sedition. Save us - from the Roman occupation... and replace the rule of the Roman Emperor? To compound things Jesus rode a donkey like King David when he came in peace... So, according to Matthew, '...the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'

I'm pretty sure that the people of Italy and Spain have been praying in recent weeks, 'Lord, save us!' as the number of people needing intensive medical care has overwhelmed their health systems, and the number of those who have died has steadily risen.

We can join in prayer with them using the original meaning of the Aramaic 'Hosanna!' Lord save them... and save us; Lord help them... and help us.'

But we can also helpfully ask the question that the Jerusalem crowds asked two thousand years ago: 'Who is Jesus?' ...for me and for you.

What significance does Jesus have in our own journeys of life and faith? And does this strange season we live in give us an opportunity to grow more deeply in our understanding of God, and practice of faith?

Please join with me in prayer:

God of grace and love,

We give thanks for the gift of our lives
and for the hope that comes from faith in Christ.

As we continue to face an uncertain future,

Renew us each day and give us courage;

Help us to be wise, compassionate, and creative,
as we find new ways of being Church and being community.

We pray for your blessing particularly
on all who serve in the front line of medical care,
and for those working to develop a vaccine.

And, we pray in the name of the one who healed the sick;
and set the captives free,

Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen