

April 5th 2020 Sermon – Rev Tony Rindl, Vicar of St Mary’s Church Watford

Welcome to our service for Sunday 5th April. Today is Palm Sunday, the day when Christians remember how Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowds cheering, waving their palm branches with shouts of Hosanna. Listen now as we hear St Mark’s account of that event.

Chapter 11 beginning at verse 1. As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethpage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no-one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ tell him, ‘the Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”

“They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

And now may I speak to you in the name of the living God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Perhaps one of the best sermons, indeed one of the most memorable I ever heard, was at the Greenbelt Christian Arts Festival many years ago. The speaker or should I say the preacher, was the famous American Baptist Minister Tony Camparolo, the sermon was entitled “It is Friday, but Sunday is coming”. Like all good sermons the message was simple and also the idea had been copied from someone else. So I say the theme of this sermon is very simple. When the disciples were witnessing the events of Good Friday, in the midst of the trauma and terror of those events, they would have had no idea of what was round the corner, the joy and amazement of Easter Sunday. The reality of the Resurrection and the joy of encountering the risen Lord would have been the last thing on their mind. Its very much part of our human experience, when you are in the thick of it, when everything is desperate and we are fearful and anxious, its hard to imagine how the situation can change and how things can be resolved and turn out alright in the end. We certainly live in uncertain times as news seems to get steadily worse concerning coronavirus. It is hard to see when and how it will all end. There are so many uncertainties, so much is out of our control. All we can do is follow the advice that we have been given and hope for the best. It seems as one Christian writer put it that we are in a very small boat in a ferocious storm with no shore in sight. Today is Palm Sunday and

normally we would be in church holding our palm crosses aloft and imagining the scene we have just read about in our Gospel reading. This Palm Sunday is still an invitation for us in our hearts and in our imagination to go with Jesus, to walk with him through the events of Holy Week, to hear his teaching as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. To allow the words of the Gospel to reveal Jesus' teaching to us, and in a sense to be with the disciples at the Last Supper. To reflect on what it means when Jesus stoops down and washes his disciple's feet and says to Peter "unless I wash you, you have no part with me." It gives us an opportunity to think how does the command to love one another as I have loved you impact on the way we live our lives. Today we have the invitation in our imaginations to go with Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus agonises over what he believes God, his heavenly Father, is asking of him. In prayer he agonises to the point where the sweat on his brow is like beads of blood, and he surrenders his will to the will of God and while he is doing this, his disciples are asleep. When Jesus most needed his friends, they are found sleeping. And then Judas betrays him. Then Jesus is arrested and faces trial and whilst this is all happening Peter denies his Master three times. Good Friday begins with the cock crowing three times, Peter weeps bitterly, Jesus is tried, and is sentenced to death, he is beaten and mocked, forced to carry his own cross to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. The disciples in fear have scattered. They could only watch on as Jesus is nailed to that cross. And on the cross Jesus cries out "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" He dies, a darkness covers the world. It is Friday. And for those disciples that witness and experience these events, there is no sign of hope. As the light faded so did their hope. They have no sense that this desperate, that this frightening, bewildering hopeless situation could ever change. They have no idea that Sunday is just around the corner.

So on this Palm Sunday when we think of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem with the crowds cheering Hosanna with all their hope and expectation. It is worth reflecting on how the mood changes when this person Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, who the crowd see as being their Messiah, the one who will restore the fortune of Israel, and will bring about his kingdom and will set the people at liberty from their oppressors, when he is arrested and crucified, how the mood changes from one of joy to one of desperation and despair.

But as we reflect on those events of Holy Week, we might want to take a step back and consider the story which appears immediately before the description of Jesus riding into Jerusalem. I think it has some bearing and has much to say on our present situation. It is the story of the healing of the blind man Bartimaeus. The Gospel narrative has shifted, Jesus has moved away from Galilee in the North, away from the lake and surrounding hills. He is no longer going from village to village preaching good news, healing the sick and performing all sorts of miracles that give credibility to his claim that God's Kingdom has come here on earth. Jesus has moved from Galilee and as he travels towards Jerusalem, he passes through Jericho and he comes across Bartimaeus, this blind man who begs him to heal him. Can you imagine what it must be like to be healed from blindness, to suddenly be able to see the blue sky, to see the sand, the hills, the palm trees, the crowds. To open your eyes and to see Jesus in front of you, looking at you, and no doubt smiling at you. How your world would have been changed in an instant. You were blind but now you see. I believe the story of the healing of Bartimaeus is purposely included because the Gospel

writer wants us to consider our own blindness, our spiritual blindness. The blindness that cannot see what Jesus is doing, the blindness that fails to see how much God loves us, the blindness that fails to see how much it costs for our sins to be forgiven, the blindness that fails to see how precious we are to God. The blindness that cannot see beyond our present situation with this coronavirus. The blindness that prevents us from seeing our future with God. The blindness that locks us into the Friday experience with no sense of Sunday being just around the corner.

At times like this when we are unnerved and frightened and uncertain as to what the future holds, its hard to see where all this is going to end. Yet, however we might be feeling right now, how difficult it is to see an end to this retched coronavirus, let us believe that God is with us. The Christian hope and belief has always been that it doesn't end with Good Friday. There is Easter Sunday. So often we don't see the whole picture, or as St Paul says "we see dimly" as in a mirror, a cloudy distorted image. But one day we will see fully, and we will understand and know fully as we are fully known and loved by God. The Gospel writer tells us that this healed blind man followed Jesus along the road. Of course, this can mean many things, but the phrase "he followed Jesus along the road" suggests to me that Bartimaeus knew that Jesus who had healed him was also the way to salvation, even to eternal life. "Go" Jesus had said to him, "your faith has healed you." Immediately Bartimaeus received his sight and he followed Jesus along the road. We have the same invitation, to go and follow Jesus along the road, to allow Jesus to take us from where we are now, to where he wants us in the future. Most of us have time on our hands. Time each day to follow Jesus through the events of Holy Week. So as we read about Jesus, how he taught in the temple court, this will lead us to the Last Supper, which in turn will take us to the heart of what Jesus is teaching his disciples. As he washes his disciples' feet and commands them to love and serve one another. And yet amongst those present is Judas. And we don't know what his motives are, it may have been sheer greed, it may have been he was bitterly disappointed, it may be that he was simply fulfilling God's purpose. Either way Judas betrays Jesus. And then as Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane and how he agonises over what he has to do, to such an extent that we are told the sweat on his brow is like droplets of blood. It is in the Garden that Jesus submits to the will of the Father. Uncertain about what will happen next, he still is able to trust his Father and to submit to his will. Jesus is arrested, the disciples scatter in fear and as Jesus is taken to a place of confinement, Peter that most eager and impulsive of Jesus' disciples, denies Jesus three times. The next day, the Friday, begins with the cock crowing three times, Peter has denied Jesus, Judas in his remorse for what he has done hangs himself, the other disciples are scattered and are in hiding such is their fear. Jesus is brought to trial, he is sentenced to death, he is flogged, and beaten and made to carry his cross to Golgotha the place of execution. There this most cruel punishment is dispensed as Jesus is nailed to the cross. On the cross Jesus cries out "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The sky turns black as the son of man dies on that cross. It is Friday and in that moment hope is extinguished. For those disciples in that moment they cannot see how this situation can possibly change. All they can see is this violence and distress. They are locked in their fear and guilt. They see no future, no hope. It is Friday.

It is an experience that many of us go through, and we are going through it right now with this coronavirus. We cannot see how this will end. We only see the headlines on the news,

yet more death, and more problems, struggling to cope with the numbers who are falling ill. It is Friday, it is dark and we are frightened and we are confused. This Palm Sunday, this Holy Week, will be like no other Holy Week we have experienced. Perhaps for many of us it will be a very real experience, one where we share the dread and helplessness of those disciples. We share in the confusion, the agony, the distress. I hope though that something inside us whispers, it is Friday but Sunday is coming. I hope that as we journey through Holy Week it becomes a little louder. Its Friday, but Sunday is coming. I hope over the following weeks as we go through this time of self-isolation and social distancing, I hope that it becomes even louder, Its Friday, but Sunday is coming. I hope that we will begin to see like on that glorious first Easter day, where St John records that early in the morning when it was still dark, Mary of Magdelene visited the grave and in that dim, milky, first light something stirs. The stone has been rolled away, and the grave is empty. Hope which had been extinguished, had been buried, has now reappeared. It is Sunday, a new day.

My friends its Friday but Sunday is coming, and when this is all over, and it will be over, I hope we will look back and see the road that we have travelled. I pray that like Bartimaeus we will see, we will see freedom, we will see people, we will see what Jesus has done, we will see what God is doing, we will see what really matters. Already we are changing. Things that we have always taken for granted; family, friends, work, leisure have all that much greater value. We yearn for freedom.

I read this week of a 93 year old Italian man who has overcome coronavirus. And he was presented with a bill for his medical care, and he was overcome with emotion. A kind doctor said, "look if you can't afford this, we can help." The old man said "no, its not that, I have the money, but what I realise is that for the last 93 years I have been breathing oxygen for free. God has given me this life and I have enjoyed the benefits of breathing freely for 93 years without having to pay for anything!". Such is the grace God bestows on each one of us. That's life, that's freedom. That's been bought for us, one Friday many many years ago on a hill in Palestine. On that cross God suffered, his Son died, it was Friday, Good Friday, and then came Sunday and with it the hope of the empty grave. Like Bartimaeus may our eyes be open to see, our minds open to understand, our hearts open to believe in the goodness of God. To have the faith to say Its Friday but Sunday is coming. Amen.

And so let us pray in this time of great uncertainty, great distress. We come to God seeking his help, seeking his protection, to sustain us and to strengthen us throughout this time of trial. Keep us good Lord under the shadow of your mercy. In this time of uncertainty and distress. Sustain and support the anxious and fearful, and lift up all who are brought low that we may rejoice in your comfort, knowing that nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.

Lord Jesus you taught us to love our neighbour and to care for those in need as if we were caring for you. In this time of anxiety give us the strength to comfort the fearful, to tend the sick, and to assure the isolated of your love. For your name's sake, Amen.

God of compassion be close to those who are ill, afraid or in isolation. In their loneliness be their consolation. In their anxiety be their hope. In their darkness be their light. Through him who suffered alone on the cross, but reigns with you in glory, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

We pray for those who are ill. Merciful God we entrust to your tender care those who are ill or in pain, knowing that whenever danger threatens, your everlasting arms are there to hold them safe. Comfort and heal them and restore them to health and strength, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We pray also for the hospital staff and medical researchers. Gracious God give skill, sympathy and resilience to all who are caring for the sick, and your wisdom to all those searching for a cure. Strengthen them with your Spirit that through their work many will be restored to health, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

We pray for the Christian community. We are not people of fear, we are people of courage. We are not people who protect our own safety, we are people who protect our neighbours safety. We are not people of greed, we are people of generosity. We are your people God, giving and loving wherever we are, whatever the cost, for as long as it takes, where ever you call us. Amen.

And so we conclude our prayers by saying together, the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father in Heaven,

Hallowed be Your Name,

Your Kingdom come,

Your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread,

Forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us,

Lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil,

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are Yours now and forever. Amen.

A Blessing. And now may the peace which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his son Jesus Christ our Lord.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you this day and remain with you always. Amen.