

Palm Sunday Sermon – 28th MARCH 2021

Randy Vickers

A Roller Coaster Ride of a week.

Psalm 118:19-24 Phillipians 2:5-11. Mark 11; 1-11.

Even before I started to write the sermon for today, before I had even looked at the various readings set in the Lectionary, I had already decided to entitle it “A Roller Coaster Ride”. Because that is how it hits me – slow times and horrendously fast times, high peak times, low desperate times, turmoil, tension, the sorrow of loss and separation then the surprising and super joy of being re-united but for some, that expectation to be re united, will have to be delayed and so their joy cannot yet be consummated. For many all the experiences of a covid year rolled into one week. Turmoil and tension, it’s in the news, it’s in our lives, it’s like we are all Jerusalem and we need to look around at all that is happening, not just outside but within ourselves. This could be difficult but so is the whole of Holy week.

Tension in our lives, tension in Jesus life. The one who enters Jerusalem is the one who will rise on the third day and He plans on taking us with Him but first the roller coaster. And I am not wanting in any way trying to belittle or play down the spiritual and physical wonders of the trials and agonies of Jesus in this precious week through which Jesus gave us the entry, through Him, into eternal life to share in His glory.

Then I found so much of it summed up in one of the readings I have chosen for today. Phillipians 5:2-11. Although it has already been read I want to read it again. On the internet I saw that someone described it as follows:-

“the oldest poem, the oldest song, ever written by Christians from the beginning of time. And they wrote it, they were from Philippi, they were Phillipians, and St Paul writes to them in his

epistle and he quotes the poem to the people of Philippi, besieged under great persecution as Jesus was, and this is what St Paul writes to them:

“Christ the Messiah, Jesus our Lord, though He was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

Rather, He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,

coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance,

He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name

that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,

of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

But let us go first to Palm Sunday itself.

Unfortunately in this Covid time we cannot in any way replicate the Palm Sunday we read about in Mark 11. Not for us any procession of palms, but we have been able to bless and wave them over our Zoom connection but none of the great joy and excitement that the crowds in Jerusalem felt when they believed all their dreams and wishes and expectations of centuries had come true and the Messiah, the King was riding into the capital city to take over the reigns of government, and release them once and forever from all aspects of oppression. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David. This truly was euphoric - the top most peak of the roller coaster ride before the plunge into the depths at a most alarming frightening rate.

But next we are on a smooth gentle section of the ride. A Passover meal shared amongst the 12 closest to Jesus where we learn we can be one with Christ as we learn of the promise of being able to receive his body and blood but also the treachery to come. Next the agony of Jesus in prayer to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane but where we see the commencement of the trail of blood through which Jesus is to redeem the world. In Luke 22 v 44 we read how in His agony the sweat on his forehead like drops of blood fell to the ground. We remember back to Genesis 3

Genesis 3: cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life 19 by the sweat of your face.

This was a curse on man and the whole earth. Behind the brow is the brain, the seat of learning, thinking and emotion. The brow stays at an even temperature and our sweat keeps the brain from overheating. With the blood on his brow Jesus dealt with the fall first and foremost. The sweat like blood, shows that the fall would be thrown back and man redeemed. That because of it we can claim freedom in our body, in our emotions and in our thinking. So the first place of the blood means our redemption from the fall through which came sin and death.

Then the treachery, but also the power and wonder of who He is. The commandos came to arrest Him and called His name, Jesus of Nazareth? Jesus simply replied I Am He. "I am" is the name by which God told Moses to refer to Him, when Jesus said it, the soldiers fell over backwards. Can you imagine the scene, Jesus had to stand there whilst they picked themselves up and dusted themselves down. It was Jesus who actually gave them the power to arrest Him, under their own steam they did not stand a chance.

Next, Jesus is deserted by all His followers and in Mark 14;53 is being interrogated by the High priest and all the chief priests – can you imagine the ignominy of this. They asked him "are you the Messiah the son of the blessed one and Jesus said "I Am

and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power.”

“The Son of Man,” is also significant biblical language. Scholars debate the exact meaning of the phrase, but here in Mark it surely means, at least, “human,” a literal son of man, “a human person.”

Putting together the “I AM” with “the Son of Man” in Jesus’ declaration, we catch the astonishing significance of what Jesus is saying, and it is this: “I AM now where God is to be found. God is to be found right here in this mortal human.” God is now with Jesus so much more intimately than even at his baptism, where the voice of God declared Him to be My beloved Son.

The unstoppable presence of the Power of God, Creator of the heavens & the earth, are now INSIDE Jesus. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury puts it this way,

“God is no longer separate from {Jesus}. ... through what {Jesus now} does and suffers, {Jesus is establishing} what the voice of God and the presence of God might mean in this world.”

The meaning is that the life God creates is unquenchable. Williams continues, “God’s presence and resource, God’s love and mercy, cannot be extinguished by loneliness or injustice, or by the terrible, apparently meaningless suffering in which human beings can live.”

It is in his deepest suffering where Jesus recognizes the fullness of his identity, as the Son of the Father. It is in his deepest suffering that Jesus knows God the Father most. What is true for Jesus, is also true for us, because Jesus shows us the fullness of what it is to be human as well as the fullness of what it is to be God.

So we learn that the God of life comes to each of us deeply and truly in our dark moments, offering all God’s resources as

creator and sustainer of all life, to bring us through such dark times to new life on the other side.

God does not make Jesus' suffering vanish. God does not make our suffering vanish. The new life to which we can be brought on the other side of the suffering often looks very different than the old one.

There's only one sentence that explains all of this and it's one that we can ruminate and think about forever and never penetrate its sweetness.

And that is when we say that he came out of love, that he lived out of love, that he died out of love, and because he put love in the centre of the world, it would never be removed.

And the one last and fine hope is to follow him, Jesus of Nazareth, who loved, who loved us all."

The roller coaster takes the steep horrifying dive down through the crucifixion into death and hell only to scream up again to the highest of peaks, in the fullness of the resurrection, giving us the privilege of being able to fulfil that one last fine hope that Rowan Williams tells us about. The curtain is split in two so we can follow Jesus of Nazareth through into the Holy of Holies.