

Sermon – Palm Sunday

With the start of Holy Week today, we enter the most important eight days in the Church's year. This week needs to be understood in its totality; for whilst the individual events of each day are significant, the true impact and meaning of Easter Day is only grasped in the light of the entire journey we undertake from Palm Sunday onwards. Not everyone is able to participate fully in Holy Week and attend a service each day or devote time at home to reflection and prayer. For that reason, today's sermon is not confined to the events of that first Palm Sunday alone but reflects more broadly on the unfolding days to come.

The journey for the disciples and followers of Jesus during the events of that momentous week was deeply personal and emotional. It is not without good reason that the events of Holy Week have been compared with a roller coaster ride, with all its highs and lows. The closest analogy might be the ride 'Oblivion' at Alton Towers. This ride slowly rises 65 feet above the Derbyshire countryside before plunging 168 feet vertically into darkness underground at a speed of 68 miles an hour before emerging into the sunlight beyond. The ride only takes 1 minute and 15 seconds but into that short timeframe is compacted all the emotions of Holy Week from the excitement and anticipation of Palm Sunday through the fear and desolation of Good Friday and into the joy and relief of Easter Day. Our week is likely to be less dramatic, and yet, for us to truly enter into the spirit of Holy Week and to understand the joy of Easter, we need, in some sense, to connect with these very human emotions.

To explore the emotions and the events of that week more closely let me draw out four different ways of describing the change that the disciples experienced during those days; changes that we too should look for in our own understanding and experience of the Christian faith journey.

The first is the journey from dreams to hope.

Despite Jesus' best efforts, the disciples didn't grasp the nature or significance of Jesus even by the time that first Palm Sunday arrived. Many still dreamt that Jesus might confront the Roman authorities and lead a rebellion against the occupation. That he would challenge the religious establishment and their collusion with the power brokers from Rome and bring freedom and justice for the ordinary Jew and Gentile.

Those dreams were dashed by Good Friday to be replaced by desolation and despair until the early shoots of hope emerged that Easter morning.

The difference between our dreams and hope is worthy of reflection. When I asked children at Cold Aston school this week to explain the difference to me, one lad said that you know dreams aren't going to come true, whereas you believe in what you hope for. We need to remember this distinction when we pray, for too often our prayers are infused with wishful thinking not divine hope. As Christians our sense of hope is rooted in the assurance of salvation and liberation; we're not hedging our bets when we believe in God for our hope is rooted in the revelatory story of God's son and His victory, for us, over all evil, even over death itself. We too need to ensure that we are not day dreaming followers of Jesus, but fully committed believers in the hope of Easter day.

The second transitional experience of those first disciples – and us too as we follow the events of Holy Week – is the journey from being an admirer of Jesus Christ to being a participant in the Christ story.

Jesus was never short of a crowd during his ministry, yet come Good Friday most of his male followers had dispersed and it was left to the few faithful women of this company to share the good news of the resurrection amongst a not entirely convinced band of disappointed and frightened disciples. Once surrounded by admirers, even on Easter morning Jesus had few followers who were convinced enough to inherit the burden of his message.

Slowly the significance of the events surrounding that final meal in the upper room began to be understood. In two simple and ordinary events – the washing of feet and the breaking of bread – Jesus taught his disciples how to cease being a distant admirer of this prophet from Galilee and instead how to become an active participant in God's story of revelation.

The two acts pull us in different directions.

Serving others – as illustrated by the washing of feet – remains the only way to truly discover our own humanity. People give themselves to others in countless – often burdensome - tasks every day because in so doing they learn more about themselves and the nature of the human condition. It simply isn't possible to become truly human through being

committed to consumerist or hedonistic lifestyles. It is only possible through the gift of one's own life to others.

Simultaneously Jesus showed his disciples in that upper room that the only way to draw closer to Him was through joining together with others in the sharing of ordinary things – bread and wine – not simply as an act of remembrance but also as an act of engagement with Christ; for it is in the ordinary things of life that Christ is to be found and it is through the company of fellow believers that we nourish one another's lives in Christ.

These continue to be the fundamental foundations of the Christian church and Christian living today.

The third emotional journey we experience in Holy Week takes us from believing in power to believing in vulnerability. On Palm Sunday we witness the idiosyncrasy of a King entering Jerusalem not surrounded by armies of soldiers, but simply riding on a donkey. This is reinforced by the foolishness of Jesus in acting like a servant in the washing of his disciples' feet, the isolation, loneliness and fear of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, the humiliation of Jesus carrying his own cross to Golgotha and the ultimate experience of vulnerability expressed by His dying for us on a cross, alone, but for the company of two convicted criminals. And yet, in each of these acts of vulnerability we discover a power beyond words, a power that is accessible to all who choose to act in the confidence of the risen Christ.

And finally, in our journey of Holy Week we experience the transition from wanting to believe in Jesus to the knowledge that Jesus truly is risen and fully alive and present with us now. Many Christians grasp that on Easter morning in all its fullness, many more of us hardly sense it at all or do so only very fleetingly.

Christians want to believe in the resurrection, yet none of us escape the entrapment of doubt that is reinforced for us so readily through the terrible world events of which we read daily. We can't easily escape doubt, for doubt comes with being human; it is simply part of who we are. Faith is the willingness to trust that the truth of the gospel that we glimpse on our journey through life, will continue to strengthen as we engage with God, the scriptures, church and one another, and that eventually it will expand into a fullness of knowledge whether in this life or the next.

All of this, makes the journey of Holy Week essential for every Christian who wishes to deepen their understanding of the mystery of Christ.

To state the obvious, without Easter, there would be no reason to celebrate the incarnation at Christmas; but without the events of Holy Week, there would be no reason to celebrate Easter either. It is in the unfolding events of this week that we not only discover the depth of the meaning to Easter morning, but that we also discover the tools we need to navigate life – the importance of servanthood and the gift of the Eucharist from the Last Supper, and the importance of honesty in prayer that we glean from Gethsemane.

As you journey through Holy Week, may your week be blessed and may you sense the transforming power of God in Christ this coming Easter Morning, Amen.