

Palm Sunday 2020

Passion and Love

Sermon preached by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

This will be a very strange Holy Week and Easter indeed for us all. For those of us used to joining with each other and being in church every day in these great days of the Easter Triduum, we're likely to feel a real sense of loss and bereavement. Unlike deprivations experienced by previous generations, such as in WW2, we at least do have the technology to connect with each other in ways such as this, and with WhatsApp and similar video calling for families and friends to stay in touch.

Palm Sunday is a pivotal moment in our Lenten journeying. We move swiftly today from remembering the jubilant crowds at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, to the dramatized reading of the Passion which we've just heard. The pain of friends deserting him; the pain of a sham trial; the humiliation and terror and pain of being nailed to a cross. When we speak of the 'Passion of Christ', we generally think of it as meaning the suffering inflicted on Jesus. But the passion is not just something 'done to' Jesus by others: but rather it is a passion and power within him – his passion that enables him to face violence and pain.

It is a passion that reveals the reaches of his passion in life: his undying urge to do the Father's will; his preference for the poor and marginalized; his fury at those in authority that burdened people already burdened; his when we're economical with love and mercy, generosity and forgiveness.

All the love that Jesus passionately shows: it makes those in power uncomfortable – so uncomfortable that they want to be rid of him. That's what we hear afresh on Palm Sunday, and in the days ahead.

How does our faith, in the one who so passionately loves us, help us in times like these, where we continue to reel at the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak worldwide?

Where is God in all this?

We have to remember that if we wished for a world in which we could rely on divine intervention to stop pandemics and disasters, we'd be wishing for a world so different from the one we have as to be unimaginable. The world God created (and in Genesis "saw that it was good") was this one, not some other, safer, version.

But that's very little comfort to those affected in so many ways by the current crisis. For me it is a reminder that the Christian faith will not so much 'answer all my questions as question all my answers'¹: it's the wrong time for Christian apologetics or academic theology. Rather prayer and silence is surely the honest response – and that prayer should lead to us making every possible effort personally and as a community to help wherever we can, to show that we too are passionate, as Jesus is: passionate about showing our love and compassion for those less fortunate than us.

I saw this week our headteacher at St Edmundsbury Primary School. Like other schools, he and his staff are struggling to run, as it were, two schools: some staff grappling with technology, and teaching from home 'virtually' using video conferencing. Other staff running a 'real' school for the children of keyworkers still coming into the school building.

I was struck by something he said – that what's really noticeable is that the people normally at the top of our newsfeeds – the entertainment personalities, sports personalities, pop stars, the glamorous and rich – are now well down the list. The people in the public gaze now are those heroes in the crisis: teachers such as his staff, those in the front line in our health care and care homes,

our police, those keeping rubbish collections and sewage farms going – you will name many others; and those doing simple human acts of kindness, like going shopping or collecting prescriptions for those stuck at home: some of our own wonderful cathedral lay staff have been engaging in just such things.

“We were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick²”. So said Pope Francis in his recent *Urbi et Orbi*.

Only now, as the virus affects everyone, even those normally insulated against disaster, do we see those in power waking up and proper public recognition given to those who, all along, have actually been binding together the fabric of our society.

This Holy Week, as you gaze at the Cross of Christ, remember to be thankful. Thankful for Christ’s passionate love for the world and its peoples. Thankful for his passionate love for you. Remember to accept God’s love and mercy for yourself. And be passionate about making it real for others. Remember that the Cross is something you can only relate to in amazement and silence. Whenever you feel abandoned, lonely, isolated, stressed, just look at the Cross – and particularly as these days of the COVID-19 pandemic bring anxiety, distress, bereavement: remember that someone loves you so much – and continues to love you so much – that they were prepared to die for you.

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¹Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words*, Canterbury Press 2017

²Pope Francis: *Urbi et Orbi*, 3 April 2020.



Stained glass, St Edmundsbury Cathedral south aisle:
the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem ‘Palm Sunday’.