

Palm Sunday 2024

It's going to be a full week should we choose to keep Holy Week in its entirety beginning today with the Palm Procession and the Reading of the Passion (this year according to Mark), continuing with Maundy Thursday (I give you a new commandment that you are to love another as I have loved you), Good Friday and concluding with Easter Night and Day. It is through the Church's keeping of Holy Week (the Triduum) that Christians the world over are called to draw near to Christ anew in his passion and enter into and uncover new dimensions and depths in faith. Let me put it simply. We are finite. God endures. God endures forever. Before the mystery God's passion in Christ we do not stand alone. Generation after generation of men and women like us yet different from us the world over have stood before the mystery that is God and the mystery of His Revelation, His atoning love.

Of Holy Week there are some who say let the liturgy be the sermon and they are correct for those who believe, and who can enter into the liturgy of the week, as well as the structure of the Christian year with its ebbs and flows. Both the liturgy and the Christian year are vessels that hold us and we are to inhabit them for our benefit as we allow the liturgy and the Christian year imperceptibly to shape us. We can spell things out endlessly sometimes to diminishing effect, but we can and should also sense, explore, feel our way... Our imaginations are called on as we are directed by the readings, the enactments such as the washing of the disciples' feet or the proclamation of the cross on which 'Hung the Saviour of the World' and more or less familiar hymns, anthems and yes at Christ church by organ pieces.

At the beginning of today's service through liturgical movement, the Palm Procession, we have entered Jerusalem. We are within the city walls over which thrones the Temple, which Scripture tells us took forty-seven years to build. We are in the city with Jesus. On this day some 2000 years ago Jesus entered Jerusalem. Mark informs us just how observant Jesus was, 'Then he [Jesus] entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.' (Mark 11.11)

Of Jerusalem Jesus says, 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Matthew 23:37) One of these prophets is the eighth-century prophet

Amos, whose central message is that God is just and impartial and will not only judge the nations but also his own people for their life of ease and indifference amid human suffering. All have sinned. All are under judgement. Israel too is under judgement. The Church is under God's judgement. All must give account for their sins against God. As our preacher said clearly last week, 'Our evil offends him [God], and our evil against his creation, against those whom he loves, offends him. Sin is, first, against God.'

In and through Christ the universal message concerning sin and judgement, as well as atonement becomes real. Christ is arrested for us. Christ is condemned for us. Christ suffers for us. Christ is lifted up for us. Christ dies for the sake of the world. In Holy Week we are headed for Golgatha, the place of the skull, where he who has become our life is crucified. It is a place of desolation. The devastation wrought by human wills and hands is great. And the devastation we see and relive on Good Friday and see and experience in our day and age daily belongs to each and every generation across the long expanse of human history. Great is our sin and to pretend otherwise is the great lie. The victory, if victory is the correct word, if we are not careful it can sound ever so flat, is hard won. It is costly. It is not lightly achieved. No magical wand is waved and abracadabra, lo and behold, all is well. Far from it. Life as we come to know it is not like that. Some face great challenges at the beginning of their lives, many more along the way and others at the end of their lives. Life too often is cut terribly short. As we say in the funeral service, 'In the midst of life we are in death'. The cost, the divine ransom paid, is great especially when we come to know and embrace that gift, the gift of his life of flesh and blood. We are wonderfully made. We are because God is.

The costliness of the cross ought to tell us something. What it tells me is that Christ in his humanity, in his self-emptying, as Paul writes to the church in Philippi (2.7), makes known and wants us to know that His God's identification with our human lives, our creatureliness, is complete. God's identification with our human plight is absolute. One to one. God has stooped lower than we can perceive that we might be lifted up by him, and here art, poetry and music can aid us..., but also sitting in silence before the cross - ourselves emptied that we might be filled. That which God creates, the reality of human lives lived in the confines of time and space, he shares completely to the point of death at the hands of human authorities and individuals belonging to both the religious (Jewish) and the secular (Roman) realms. Authority is attached to human beings. It is not independent of them. Their names and faces are known. They are under

God's judgement. And should we have colluded with them this too is known... to God. There is no escape. No place to hide.

Likewise Christian discipleship is costly. When we sing the hymn, 'When I survey the wondrous cross' during Holy Week we affirm this true Christian insight. The last line of Isaac Watts' hymn has us sing 'demands my soul, my life, my all'. And this insight lingers... 'demands my soul, my life, my all... Why? Because in God's absolute identification with our creaturely life he shows his love for us. Paul will write to the Church in Rome, 'But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' (Romans 5.8) I wish to end by sharing the last verse of Watts' great hymn, 'When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died'.

It reads,

Were the whole Realm of Nature mine,
That were a Present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my Soul, my Life, my All.

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