

Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday)

Written by Bishop Donald Kirk

*Trotting, trotting through Jerusalem,
Jesus sitting on a donkey's back,
children waiving branches singing
'Happy is he that comes in the name of the Lord!'*

These are the words of the hymn written by Eric Reid – a popular modern song of Palm Sunday used for children and adults alike. It picks up one of the themes of this day, the first one, because Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was his journey to death.

There are lots of beautiful images in this theme.

- There is the colt that had never bourn anyone before happy to receive Jesus and carry him through the crowd. The locals were willing to let the disciples take it for this purpose.
- There were those who softened the way for Jesus spreading their cloaks on the Road. (No mention of Palms in Luke's account – Matthew mentions them "*cutting branches from the trees*" [Mt 21.8], Mark refers to "*leafy branches that they had cut in the fields*" [Mk 11.8], and John says, "*they took branches of palm trees.*" [Jn 12.13])
- There was the sound of rejoicing; praise offered by the disciples and crowd, words that we use liturgically at every Sunday Eucharist "*Blessed is he (the King) who comes in the name of the Lord!*" [Lk 19.38]

Jesus comes to the city of Jerusalem, to the place where the temple is that symbolizes the presence of God among his people and is welcomed. He rides the donkey of peace. A clear sign to all that his intent is peace which is consistent with everything he has done and taught up to this point in his mission. The people rejoice at the idea of a peaceful King.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, complain. "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." [Lk 19.39] One can understand their concern as they perceived the crowd likening Jesus to God. Little did they realise how right the crowd were. Jesus' response to them suggests that the whole creation was rejoicing in this moment that leads to Salvation "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." [Lk 19.40]

But the story of Palm Sunday leads to the story of the Passion which is why we traditionally read both on this day. The Passion was what followed this moment of rejoicing and was indeed the real purpose of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

The words of a hymn written by Robin Mann express this:

*When his time was over the palms lay where they fell.
As they ate together he told his friends farewell.
Jesus, though you cried out for some other end,
love could only choose a cross
when our life began again.*

The longer version of the Passion from Luke begins with the Last Supper. Jesus instituting Holy Communion, the sharing of bread and wine transformed in meaning and purpose by his words. He then speaks of betrayal and, after briefly wondering who this could possibly be, they discuss which among them is the greatest. Right in this moment we have the seeds of all that follows in the disciples' behaviour. Despite having journeyed with Jesus, listened to his teaching, and seen the miracles and healings, they still manage to focus back on themselves. In this great moment in human history, they miss its significance. Only when they look back on this moment after Jesus' crucifixion do they begin to realise what he has given them, and when they do, they discover the reality of resurrection.

Jesus says to the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, *"Pray that you may not come into the time of trial"* [Lk 22.40] because he knows what it is to be human and how easily they and we can be led astray. Judas Iscariot appears as the exact example of this human trait. We find it easy to denounce Judas in the same way we find it easy to denounce the person stealing to support a drug habit. It is confronting to realise that we too could just have easily fallen into the greed trap, betray a dear friend or steal for a purpose we justify to ourselves. Little wonder the Lord's Prayer contains the words *"Save us from the time of trial"* because we have a constant human need to pray this daily.

The story of the cross is familiar to us and yet it is worthwhile rehearsing it each year. We do so this year by reading Luke's account which reveals the abusive behaviour of Pilate the Governor, Herod the King, the religious leaders of the day and the crowd whose human fickleness has them praise Jesus as King today and jeer the words *"Crucify! Crucify him!"* [Lk 23.21] on Friday. Yet in the midst of all this we see a glimmer of hope and promise. One of those who was crucified with Jesus jeered along with the crowd but the other prayed for his help causing Jesus to respond, *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* [Lk 23.43]

We come to Church today as we do regularly and are reminded today to take our faith seriously. We offer our praise to the King who came in peace in liturgy and song. We rejoice with the whole creation in the Salvation Jesus has brought to us and to all. Yet we are reminded of our fickle human nature, the reality of human failure to live as God desires, and our need to pray that we are not put to the test. Above all we are offered hope afresh in the reminder that even those who fail miserably are redeemed by the love of Jesus when they seek it.

The concluding words of Robin Mann's hymn:

*There was one who asked you, 'Remember me this day.'
Jesus, when I'm dying, remember me that way;
when my life is over, be with me, my friend,
like the thief upon the cross,
when our life began again.*