

The Paradox of Passion

Sermon message by the Rev Derek Lightbourne St James and All Saints Palm Sunday 2019

Keynote Bible passage: Luke 19.28 – 40

We have basked in the long weeks of a summer of sunshine. Now in these latter days grey clouds have swept over our city, bringing rain and cooler temperatures. This could be a symbol of the today's gospel story – of the positive response of people who clamoured to hear Jesus, and bring their needy loved ones for the ministry he offered. Yet now with the events of Palm Sunday and Holy Week there's a sense of foreboding, of darker clouds pervading the atmosphere.

- 1) The raindrops are like tears, for what was to come in this week of the *passion of Jesus*. Passion has a double meaning, of deep love, yet also of suffering. Hence my sermon this morning is entitled: 'The paradox of Passion'. The word passion is from the Latin *passio* and entered the English language back in the 12th century from its origins of 'to suffer pain'. This particularly applied to Jesus' sufferings on the cross. It wasn't till the 16th century it applied also to amorous feelings of deep love, as in 'passionate'.

The *events of Palm Sunday* are first recorded from the 4th century in Jerusalem. This marked the beginning of Holy Week and people went to the mount of Olives in the early afternoon and at 5pm the passage telling of the triumphal entry was read. People then processed from the summit of the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem. Children joined in the procession all carrying branches of palm or olive. [So, we replicate that today]. Yes, there was that paradox of passion – at one moment the gospel writers tell us the crowd gathered shouting the joyous 'Hosanna to the Son of David', and waving their branches. Just a few days later they were calling out to Pilate to crucify Jesus. There was paradox also in selecting not a horse as sign of triumph but a donkey as the humble expression of servanthood.

I'm mindful also of the loving actions and words of Martha and Mary in expressing deep and extravagant love in the anointing at Bethany, an event in the passion of Jesus. Jesus commended the action as preparing him for burial. This too reflects the paradox of passion.

- 2) In reflecting on the events and symbolism of Palm Sunday there arises in me an inner emotion of the clouds of foreboding, of what Jesus would undergo, and for humanity. Yet also there's the knowing that by these actions he triumphed over the bondages of sin and death, being raised by his heavenly father. St Paul reflected on this paradox in writing to the Philippians: 'Christ Jesus emptied himself,...being born in human likeness. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name....'

Our hymn writer poets have pondered this paradox of passion:

'My song is love unknown, my Saviour's love to me. O who am I that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die.

...Why, what hath my Lord done? What made this rage and spite? He made the lame to run, he gave the blind their sight....'

Here on one hand were those who were thirsting for death, yet of significance Luke alone records the disciple's actions: 'the large crowd of Jesus' disciples began to thank God and praise him in loud voices for all the great things they had seen and done' (19.37).

- 3) We need to remember also that we are *part of humanity*, who could deny knowing Jesus, calling for his suffering and death and running away as did the disciples in time of danger. Later on, Peter blames the Jews for Jesus' death: 'Jesus of Nazareth, whom you put to death...(Acts 4.10) and Pontius Pilate rates a mention in the Creed for the same action. As we ponder tragic events of humanity in our lifetime, one cannot but notice the capacity of inhumanity – of causing suffering.

Most recent are the actions of a human person against fellow humans, at *mosques* in Christchurch. How could there be such hate to lead to that callous action?

Last year a parishioner gave me a book to peruse when on retreat.' *'The Choice'* tells the tragic yet extraordinary story of Edith Eger, a teenage Hungarian Jew who with her family were imprisoned in Auschwitz in World War 2. There she lost her parents and saw countless others suffering from starvation, illness, and being shot or sent to the gas chambers. When the war's hostilities ended, American army forces came into the concentration camp looking for any survivors. Edith was found barely alive among human bodies.

Edith and her sister slowly recovered physically, eventually living in the United States and leading healing seminars for those in the armed forces incapacitated by PTSL (post-traumatic stress disorder).

Through this time of rehabilitation Edith wrestled with the whole notion of *forgiveness* – for what had occurred (forgiving others), and of personal forgiveness in seeing her parents led away – to the gas chamber and not trying to stop it (the exceedingly difficult forgiving herself). The book's title is of the choice in how to live with all this. Thus, she wrote: 'You can't change what happened, you can't change what you did or what was done to you. But you can choose how to live *now*'.

4) May I suggest *we also experience this paradox of passion*. We surely feel a deep pain when a loved one is suffering – be it through circumstances, of illness, grief, tragedy. It is like St Paul wrote to the Roman believers: 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, *weep with those who weep*. And as the song offers: 'I will weep when you are weeping, when you laugh, I'll laugh with you. I will share your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through.' We are drawn to love through suffering. Indeed, may I further suggest that because of suffering we are drawn to even greater love, more than we realise having that capacity. So, if with us, then how much more of Jesus. Indescribable really as the Scripture: 'That we may know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge and be filled with all the fullness of God.' Good News Bible translates it: Yes, may you come to know his Christ's love – although it can never be fully known – and so be filled with the very nature of God.' (Ephesians 3.19)

Our understanding such as it can be, is linked with the passion of Christ, of his deep love – for his friends, and for those to whom he said 'Father forgive them.' And we are also very mindful of Christ's suffering, on humanity's, on our behalf. Thankfully, we can praise God for the action of Jesus' overcoming death, as Peter testified to the Jewish Council, of Jesus 'whom God raised from death' (Acts 4.10). This being the great action of *salvation*, that God would do this for all humanity past, present and future. God who 'so loved the world....'

Concluding then, as we enjoy the long warm days of summer there comes times of the grey clouds and the rain, the sadness and the tears – yet the blue skies and the warmth will return. It is a symbol of the paradox of passion, and this is especially represented in the events we know as Palm Sunday. Sadness, and pain in suffering give way to faith and hope and belief. This is in God whose purpose extends to the great depth of love, as the hymn records: 'Father of heaven, whose love profound...a ransom for our souls have found'. We need poets to say the words our hearts feel for, and to know that salvation promised by Jesus is given you and me. Thus, our belief is as St Paul shared with the Philippians 'proclaiming Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'