

MORNING SERVICE

5 April 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

Palm Sunday

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'Now let God's people' (CH 85)

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'This is the day' (CH 194:1)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Readings : Isaiah 50:4-11 (*Good News Bible*) & John 12:12-19 (*New Jerusalem Bible*)

Hymn : 'Come into the streets with me' (CH 366)

Sermon

Palm Sunday is a complicated day. It is very much questioning us what we really hear and see. On the one hand we have this joyful entry into Jerusalem, with people singing and Jesus being hailed as king. But at the same time we know where it will lead to: his execution and death.

So today we should ask ourselves what we really hear. In truth things maybe exactly the opposite from what we think we hear. Behind the joy of the people there clearly is the sadness of Jesus – about his approaching death and about Jerusalem itself. As if we can almost hear him singing quietly: 'Understand what power is... – understand what glory is... – understand at all...'¹

But then we also know that behind the rejection and suffering the prophet Isaiah had to go through,² there clearly was the bright light of a new covenant, as seen by Jeremiah,³ and there clearly was the great vision of the people returning from exile.

For Isaiah it is, 'Today: suffering, tomorrow: salvation'; for Jesus it is the opposite, 'Today: hosanna!, tomorrow: crucify!' So, what do we hear?

Isaiah's four prophecies about the 'servant of the Lord' are traditionally applied to Jesus. His suffering ultimately made him the messiah, and Isaiah's prophecies 'prove' that. But Jewish tradition never went down that road. For the rabbis the suffering servant has always been an image of the people of Israel, and they deny that the messiah has to go through suffering. Instead of dismissing one of these traditions – regardless which one – and sticking to the other one, it could be helpful to value them

¹ As in *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

² That is of course: in the narrative. Strictly speaking the person who was Isaiah lived some two centuries before the days of these Deutero-Isaiah prophecies (Isaiah 40-45). For a brief explanation see [Wikipedia](#).

³ E.g. Jeremiah 31:31-34, which we read on Lent V.

both.

Isaiah was prophesying to the people of Israel, in this case at the very end of their Babylonian exile. Returning to Palestine was becoming an option, but the cost of that would be considerable. They would have to rebuild Jerusalem from scratch without any guarantee of success. To them Isaiah says: 'Accept the hardship, trust in God, and you will succeed.' Yet, even today we cannot say that the project of Jews returning to Israel has been successfully – leave alone peacefully – completed. The figure of a suffering servant is still applicable to the people of Israel, either Jewish or Arab.

Even if we accept this traditional Jewish interpretation as valid, we can – we should – also keep the christian reading alive. Through Jesus' suffering and death God already *has* proven that life is stronger than evil, that salvation can happen despite death. And this message does not only come to the people of Israel, but to all people on earth. Jesus, representing Israel among the gentiles, brings the covenant to all people.

But that is not a cheap message. It will cost these people, just like it has cost the people of Israel. The story of Jesus' glorious entry into Jerusalem has all the elements in it, both joy and sadness, both glory and humiliation.

First the crowd crown him king. At least, so it seems if we hear quickly. But what has actually happened? It could well have been a playful jest, a kind of practical joke among the many pilgrims going to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. If they would have been serious in crowning Jesus, without any doubt or delay the Romans would have sent in their army. Over the festive season the troops were definitely on red alert.

But, if it was a rather jokingly action, then was there still a serious message in it? Would the people have spoken the deep truth without knowing? That could be, because John says that the disciples themselves did not really understand what was going on at that time.

If the true message was more or less hidden behind the playful outside, that may teach us something about Jesus' kingship. He is an upside-down king, being crowned by the people (instead of his aristocratic ancestry); riding a donkey (instead of a proud horse); coming with a retinue of fishermen (instead of an army).

In a similar back-to-front way the Pharisees seem to see what is really going on. Looking at the crowds of dust-covered, tired pilgrims following Jesus, they say mockingly, 'The whole world is after him.' They don't think much of this world of poor, lame, uneducated, and generally rough people. But unknowingly they are right: this is exactly what Jesus came for and these people are the main focus of the God of Israel: the poor, the lonely, the broken-hearted people. For them Jesus is the answer, and after Jesus has died they will start spreading the news all around the world.

Through a long history of discrimination and persecution the Jewish people had to learn what it means to be a suffering servant. Only after Jesus had died and was risen

again, and through re-reading their Hebrew bible, his disciples began to understand what had really happened. Not the obvious things they saw and heard were true, but what was hidden in and beyond that.

Like the disciples we have to learn to look twice and to hear differently if we want to see the truth about Jesus' suffering and death. We will not find it in a remote past, in a holy history from a different time and place. Jesus dies *for us*. That means that it is still happening today. He is crucified in the poor who will get the bill for the credit crunch; in the workers who do not know whether or not they can keep their jobs; in the farmers and shopkeepers who have to accept all these rules making their business impossible; in this earth that is exploited and destroyed.

Yet, this is not a simple and easy message. It may be difficult to believe, or hard to see. The poor, the workers, or the people in business are no saints, nor is this earth divine. But only when we accept that Jesus is present in all of this as the suffering servant, we can begin to descry the light of God's salvation. It is through – or perhaps: despite – our suffering that the light of God will be revealed.

All the suffering in our world today *does* matter to God. It will not vanish. But in faith we may dare to see through it, to hear a different tune amidst the noise and rumble. The cry for crucifixions – ranging from the call for strong leadership down to public lynching – may be the sound we can hear most easily. In faith we may know that this is not the ultimate message. There is life beyond all this death. Isn't that unbelievable?

Amen.

Hymn : 'All is ready for the feast' (CH 373: 1, 3, 6, 14)

Offering brought forward

Prayer of Intercession

Closing Hymn : 'In Christ there is no east or west' (CH 624)

Blessing