

MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 28 March 2010, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

Palm Sunday

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

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

Welcome & Intimations

Palm Crosses procession

Opening Hymn : 'You are the king of Israel' (CH 364)

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'Spirit of God unseen as the wind' (CH 600)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

We thank and praise you, O God,
for every time we meet you;
when we are out for a walk
 and the earth looks like heaven;
when we are at home together
 and everything is just perfect;
when we are at work with others
 and working is just a joy;
when we go to school
 and everyone is nice to us;
when we watch the news
 and learn that peace and justice do exist,
 sometimes.

In all these moments we experience
that you, O God of heaven and earth,
are the one who creates every day,
the one who truly cares.

God, in your mercy
HEAR OUR PRAYER.

And we confess, O God of creation and care,
that we sometimes want to push it
and make your kingdom come
in the way we want it.
It happens when we overrule others
 and force things our way;
when we claim our understanding of you

to be the only true one;
when we want to create your kingdom
by force of law or revolution;
when we manipulate others 'for their own good',
but it really is about what we want.
God, in your mercy
HEAR OUR PRAYER.

And now as Jesus taught us, we pray:
Our Father...
...Amen.

Readings : Isaiah 50:4-9 & Luke 19:28-40 (*Good News Bible*)

Hymn : 'Hosanna, loud hosanna' (CH 367)

Sermon

Some of our neighbours keep hens. I quite like the sight of it. Hens seem to have a gregarious lifestyle. They chatter around, take their dust baths and peck a lot. A truly pastoral view to see. However, that pecking is ambiguous. It also serves to establish a strict pecking order, using these chattering beaks as weapons if need be. Sometimes the bottom hen tragically shows off the effects of all the pecking on her.

Since a Norwegian zoologist scientifically described the pecking order among chickens in 1921,¹ the term has quickly moved into general use. All social groups have their own pecking order. Just walk into any busy pub on Friday night, get yourself a drink, find a quiet corner and watch. Or, the morning after, go to any football stadium and watch anything but the playfield. Soon you will find the 'top chickens' and those far down the ladder. And of course in these weeks of upcoming elections, the political arena is a most excellent field of research to learn about human pecking orders.

Of course any social group needs some kind of structure and that includes some kind of leadership. But that always comes at a price, and we need to decide what price we are willing to pay. The price for being a top hen in the chickenrun is that you peck on anyone else. In contrast, the bonobo – a small chimpanzee from the Congo which is biologically closely related to humans – does it differently. To keep their social structure in order they immediately appease any potential disruption by hugging, flirting and more. Both chickens and chimps successfully structure their groups, but the price paid is quite different.

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Of course we are humans, not hens or apes. I presume. But that pecking order thinking is very familiar to us. Old boys networks, the ranks within companies, the

¹ Thorleif Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Gallus domesticus in seinem täglichen Leben* (Greifswald, 1921) Phil. Diss. Also see Wikipedia, entry 'Pecking order': http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pecking_order.

ranking of organisations, the authority of churches – they all go by the simple rules of the pecking order. Some do it more like chickens, not even fearing cock & bull stories. Others are more like chimps, putting their cards on socialising.

But whoever wants to have a say, and wants that say to be heard, should abide by the rules of the game. Our politicians are working round the clock to show us how to do that. They don't do that out of their own choice. They are just pushed into it by the system itself. I still like to believe that most of them are actually nice people, but the rules of the game force them to hide it. True, some do that with vigour.

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This is about to happen to Jesus. When he approaches Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover, in the midst of the many pilgrims from all over Palestine and the Roman Empire, his disciples prepare him a triumphant entry into the city. Perhaps it started kind of like a joke. Or a half-serious holy play. A colt is not exactly what a real king would ride on. According to Matthew and John it was a donkey, and that is even less royal.

Anyway, very soon the people get serious about this play. They get carried away by the traditional Psalms they sing. According to Luke they did not try to literally crown him king, but Jesus knows what is on their minds. They expect great things to happen and Jesus will be the leader of it.

As we will read in the services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, great things will happen indeed. But totally opposite to what they people expect now. Jesus is not reaching out to grab the power. When his disciples come up with two swords, Jesus will say 'Enough!'. Neither will he invoke any supernatural intervention. Jesus simply refuses to play by the rules.

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This is very important. He *is* the blessed one who comes in the Name of the LORD. But that clearly means that he does *not* use anything we would consider as power and might. When God comes to his people, all things will be turned upside down – first of all our pecking orders.

For our church – for *any* church – this should be the golden rule for everything. Unfortunately we often fail this test. The pope wrote a pastoral letter to the church in Ireland regarding the extensive abuse of children by clergy and religious. The pastoral concern he shows is honest and deep, but the letter stops short of what he really has to address: the abuse of power which leads to abusing children. Power corrupts, and religiously legitimised power can be the most corrupt.

Jesus' disciples did not really get it when it happened on the road to Jerusalem. After all, they were only men... Much later, when they studied the Hebrew Bible to understand what Jesus had said and done, they came across the prophet Isaiah. In

the figure of the LORD's servant, who suffered for not using power or might, they recognised their Teacher, Jesus of Nazareth.

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I have to say, that I find this difficult to take in. I don't believe Christians are called to sit on the water like lame ducks. I also believe that our ancestors were right in fighting the oppression of the high and mighty: Spanish, French, English or Scottish kings, those who owned the land, the mills and the ships, all those who abused their power to their own benefit.

Yet, the Gospel persistently presents me with this upside down economy of God. Perhaps it is a warning that today's revolutionaries are likely to be tomorrow's dictators. Perhaps it tries to make us aware that our souls should aim at God whose Kingdom is not like ours. I do not have a clear answer. Justice and peace are most essential, but maybe, in the end, they do not rely on our political achievements.

Nelleke and I have always worked on just and peaceful issues: nuclear disarmament, a fair share of our common wealth for everyone, a tolerant society, an open and undogmatic church, the conservation of nature and environment. I don't regret any of it. But it seems that all we did, did not really bring God's Kingdom on earth. We have seen glimpses of it, but that was regardless of our efforts. We believe this world of peace and justice must be possible. We don't buy the harsh cynicism which says that nothing will ever change. Things *have* changed. But probably the end result will look quite different than we always thought.

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For now all we have is a story about Jesus being hailed as king while he is visibly the opposite. His kingship means he is a servant. His serving means he is not subject to any king.

As a congregation and a parish we also have our children. This week we made the palm crosses in school. I was really surprised by their enthusiasm. Six candies and a 'breadhen' each and they were really happy. My baking wasn't that good, I thought. That could be a lesson for us: you take life as it comes and still find the joy and beauty in it that makes life worth living.

And last but not least, we still have our neighbouring hens. Of course they can get pretty aggressive. But they rarely do. My late uncle Gertjan used to keep a close eye on his chickens' behaviour. If one got too bossy, she would find herself locked in a separate run. And if that did not work, well... uncle Gertjan was not a vegetarian. Most of the time hens have a happy social life. Just like these flower power chimps in the Congo.

So, let us live socially, make sure that powers are adequately balanced. And most of all, may we dare to look at the world like children. Amen.

Hymn : 'Oh, set ye open unto me' (CH 78)

Offering and Dedication

Prayer of Intercession

God of Jesus and Mary,
God of Peter and Paul,
God of us,
we pray for this world.
The powers that be are still the same as ever:
the political parties of old,
the economic powers of big money,
the military powers of rude force,
the social structures of convention and tradition,
the biological powers of life and death.
In, through and behind all these
we expect to find you.
But it's hard, O God.
Teach us what it means
that your power does not rule by power,
but by hope and faith and love.
Help us, O God,
to learn to live our lives
without being burdened by fear
for the powers that surround us.
Be with us with a word,
a touch, a helping hand,
and make us believe that these really do matter.
God, in your mercy
HEAR OUR PRAYER.

In silence we remember those
we know need us
to remember them.
(silence)

So we pray through Jesus Christ,
king on a donkey,
suffering servant of God,
and the firstborn of the new life.
Amen.

Closing Hymn : 'Ride on, ride on' (CH 370)

Blessing