

Sunday 10 April 2022
St. Margaret's – Holy Communion
Palm Sunday

Luke 22:14-71 & 23:1-56

Well, first of all, my grateful thanks to Christine and to Roger for doing so well with such a long reading.

Today is, of course, Palm Sunday and the lectionary provides two sets of scripture readings - one follows what is called the Liturgy of the Palms and the other the Liturgy of the Passion.

The story of Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem is very familiar and one that we have used most in this church on this particular Sunday.

So, I thought it would be a good idea for us to hear the entire Passion story right through.

Unless we all came to every service throughout Holy Week we wouldn't have the opportunity, at least as a gathered fellowship anyway, we wouldn't have the opportunity to hear the story of Christ's Passion from start to finish - and next Sunday is, of course, Easter Day and that's a time for looking forward rather than looking back.

So it was today or not at all.

There's such a lot to take in this story - there is.....

the last meal of Jesus with his disciples, a bitter sweet experience for all;

Jesus' struggle with fear and the loneliness of the garden which ends with a sense of peace and acceptance;

the kiss of Judas, sealing the fate of Jesus;

Peter's denial of ever having known Jesus, the same Jesus he had just eaten with and who had invited him into the garden;

the rigged trial before the religious leaders and then again before a contemptuous, cynical Pilate, the brief appearance before the superstitious and fearful Herod;

the torture, the humiliation, the degradation;

the way of Calvary - the weeping women, the reluctant Simon of Cyrene;

the crowds, so supportive on Sunday, who now just laugh and mock;

the criminal, promised eternal happiness that very day;

and then the last words of forgiveness and total surrender before a final breath.

The drama of all this is truly overpowering and almost impossible to absorb in one sitting. In fact, we could reflect on these events for a lifetime and still have more to learn.

But I wonder what impact hearing that account in its entirety has made on you just now?

Sure, we all knew the facts, but what do you feel at this very moment?

What are you thinking now?

What thoughts are going through your mind?

What emotions are welling up?

What does it all mean to you?

Let's leave that for a moment and maybe we'll come back to it.

A while ago I saw a recording of an interview with Justin Welby and his wife Caroline. This interview took place just before he was enthroned and installed in Canterbury Cathedral as Archbishop of Canterbury.

The whole thing lasted 45-50 minutes and covered a wide range of issues. All in all, it was a marvellous insight into the man and to his wife Caroline, who revealingly, never once referred to "Justin's ministry" but throughout spoke about "our ministry".

Anyway, the bit that struck me most was when Justin was asked to describe how he came to faith.

He spoke about how he spent a gap year working at a school in Africa where he lodged with a colleague who happened to be a Christian.

This colleague read his Bible and prayed every day. Justin watched him do this and thought that, maybe, there could just be something in it - so he decided he would give the Bible a go.

Like all idiots (his words not mine) he started at the beginning and found it all really difficult.

However, he felt that he should try harder and he did try hard, he tried for almost a week - and then he gave it up as a bad job and that was that.

Then, two years later, at the beginning of his second year at university, a friend invited him to come to a talk at his local church. Well, he went - apparently it was incredibly boring and it did absolutely nothing for him at all. Afterwards, his friend invited Justin back to his rooms to have something to eat and during this time together his friend explained to him all about the cross and how Jesus had died for him. It was then that it all clicked for Justin Welby and it was at

that point... (12 October 1975 - just before midnight apparently)...that he asked Jesus to be the Lord of his life.

And, as they say, the rest is history.

For me, I think the most remarkable thing about this story is the fact that the church could do nothing to bring Justin Welby to faith, but a young Christian had the courage to talk about his Saviour and what he could do for Justin, and it was that that proved to be crucial.

Now, don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying that the church has no part to play in nurturing that new faith - of course it does, and indeed, it did in Justin Welby's case - he went on to be an active member at Holy Trinity Brompton (the so called Alpha church) and later at one of John Wimber's Vineyard group of churches in Nottingham.

But what would have happened if that young student had stayed dumb and afraid? Just how might history have been changed?

What would you have done if you had been that student?

Would you have spoken out?

Perhaps you might think "this is just something for the leadership or the activists".

Or would you have been thinking "this isn't my job - after all, the vicar had already messed up when he had his chance earlier in the evening".

Maybe I should have explained to you that the young man who so faithfully led Justin Welby to Christ that night had himself only been a Christian for six months.

All of which takes us back to when I asked earlier about what impact hearing the Passion story read in full has had on each of us this morning.

What was it we heard in the Gospel reading?.....

"Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last."

This is our God.

The Servant King.

A truly wonderful Saviour!

This is exactly why we should all be happy to speak out for Jesus.

What that young Christian did for Justin Welby is discipleship at its most fundamental level.

I realise that speaking out like this can be problematic, it can be difficult - we can be afraid of feeling silly, afraid may be of losing a friendship.

It may be that we are simply afraid of failure.

Even so, whatever we do, the unconditional love of God always forgives us our failings, because it is by Grace alone that we are saved.

I could clear off to the Caribbean and lie on a beach sipping cocktails for the rest of my life and not have a care about anyone else. Now there's a thought - but if I did, I will still be loved infinitely and unconditionally by God. So, if that's true, why then should I put myself out?

Is it for the sake of any reward?

Well, no - absolutely not.

Why not?

Because the reward has already been given.

The moment we were created, we were given the gift of that infinite and unconditional love of God - and that gift is ours to keep for ever.

God has nothing more to give us.

So, if I am working for God for the sake of a reward, that makes me a mercenary and I am somehow using other people to get what I want.

The truth is, that for a Christian, the only motivation to do good is gratitude.

Gratitude that Jesus did that for me.

Gratitude for the love and grace that he showers on me every single day.

The fury of the cross is hard to contemplate, but it is nothing if it is not an individual contract.

Jesus hung and suffered on that cross for all mankind.....

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”.

but note that it says “whoever believes” - and it is that “whoever” that makes it personal. This only makes sense to me on an individual basis if I think of it as a sacrifice Jesus made for me and that is the same for us all.

When I remember the words of Psalm 139, I see that before I was even formed in my mother's womb, God knew everything there was to know about me, and Isaiah 49 tells me that my name is written on the palm of God's hand. Truly I am loved beyond understanding, as is each and every one of us.

How can we **not** be thankful?

How can we be anything **other** than overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude and thankfulness when we hear this Passion story?

It just may be, that the next time you are with someone who doesn't yet know Jesus as their Saviour, that Jesus may indeed be standing at their door and knocking whilst waiting patiently for you to play your part.

You never know, that person that you lead to Christ on that day, may just go on to become the Archbishop of Canterbury!!

Amen.