

Palm Sunday 2018. Embrace the Mess.

What a mess! Palms tossed all over the place. People wandering everywhere. Standing around outside. Waiting. Nothing is quite as it usually is. Nothing is quite as it is supposed to be.

Do I mean that first Palm Sunday ... or this morning? Actually, I mean both. And that connection is deliberate. I am sure that for some people what we did this morning for the first half of the service was annoying, distracting, frustrating and ... wrong. We sang without accompaniment. We sang different songs, some you didn't know, perhaps even some you didn't like! We sang them anyway.

The order of things was all mixed up for this service. Readings in different places. If you have been looking forward you will see that even the familiar Greeting of Peace is not in its usual place. Things this morning are all mixed up, messed up, out of place. What a mess!

Making regularity and predictability and constant order into absolute goals will take us far away from the grittiness of the experiences in which our celebrations began. Days like this are reminders of a different dynamic through which God also speaks.

I think there would have been nothing neat and ordered and quiet and predictable about that procession on the first Palm Sunday! I have walked part of that road from Bethany, down the Mount of Olives, twisting and turning on the road down into the valley, past the Garden of Gethsemane where some of the story continues on Thursday night. From the depths of that valley the road climbs again and towering over that path is the wall of the temple compound, as it was in Jesus' day.

The road is lined with palms as it would have been and ripping branches from the roadside greenery would not have been a neatly organised coordinated exercise. This was a spontaneous gesture from an excited crowd witnessing an amazing spectacle! Dust, heat, surging crowds, people jostling for position and a view. And the noise! Nothing like an orchestrated 'Hosanna' but more likely wild cries of wonder and celebration. It would have been a mess. A wonderful, glorious, exciting mess.

As we know, of course, this was not the beginning of Jesus' journey. It wasn't his first time entering Jerusalem. And it wasn't his last. But this entry was special. He was hailed as king. The imagery of Jesus' entry was extremely provocative both to the Roman overlords and the prim and proper religious leadership of Jerusalem. This journey really got up the noses of all those who had it in for Jesus before this time, and those who presided over the various parts of his trial later in the week.

Jesus provoked people. He didn't want a peaceful, gentle nodding response to his words and actions. Jesus was provocative. He called people out for their hypocrisy. He called people out for their tepid faith. He called people out for their manipulation, their prejudice, their two-faced biased behaviour. He called people out when they tried to box his words and message into a neatly sanitised, easily achievable, not too invasive and disturbing pattern which could be adopted without much real change.

Jesus was having none of that. He was provocative, disturbing, challenging and insistent on the need for real transformation, real commitment, real engagement in the lives of those who

he recalled into close connection with God. That was also why the same crowds who cried 'hosanna' could end up shouting 'crucify' a few days later. Jesus was controversial and confronting.

He still is. The same challenges which he made to the people of that time are the challenges he makes to us. The call to be real. The call to confront the things in our own journeys which need to be dragged into the light and faced honestly. That call is still very clearly there. The call to have our eyes wide open to see.

This Lent for us has been woven with stories. We have been tracking Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem. We have been tracking some of the journey of the people of God across the Old Testament, through some of the covenants made as well as the hopes expressed from times of despair and disaster.

Some of us have been weaving into this Lenten reflection the horrific stories of those who have been betrayed by our society, including church communities and leaders, when as children they were allowed to be subjected to abuse followed by inadequate responses. Hearing and reflecting on those stories has been traumatic. How much more traumatic for those who lived such experiences! Yet they are also part of the wider story and the wider journey in which we are caught up.

Human failings and the awful reality of vulnerable people being victimised come from the heart of humanity which has stopped its ears to God, stopped its heart to love, stopped its eyes from seeing clearly and honestly. The journey to the cross is a slap in the face to the conniving complacency of those who view life through the lens of their own wants and desires alone. Life lived without self-giving, altruistic, servant-hearted love pushed Jesus to the cross. The world still shudders with selfishness. The cross still grates with those who struggle to look beyond themselves.

A question which was asked in the studies reflecting on the stories of abuse was 'how did we come to this?' It came about because as a society we adopted blindness and forgot to hold onto the love which erupted in and through the messiness of the journey which we have walked into this morning.

Another pattern of journeys for us this Lent has been to hear some of one another's stories. We have been richly blessed by the sharing of those who have spoken about how they became involved in this shared journey of the church and relationship with God, and what it means to be keeping on walking.

As we walk on into Holy Week embrace the mess. Embrace the challenges which come from being out of your comfort zone. Do something different. Read more deeply. Listen more attentively. Hear the echo of a message from God in the cacophony and the chatter, not only in soft, sweet neatly ordered dulcet tones.

When I was in theological college another student objected to us singing the Sydney Carter 'Shaker' song, 'The Lord of the Dance'. As far as he was concerned our Lord would never have done anything as unseemly as to dance around the place! It seems to me that our Lord was more grounded and earthy and wild than my friend supposed.

This afternoon we have Messy Church. For some people Messy Church is an oxymoron, two words which do not belong together. But life is messy at times. Gritty and raw and not at all ordered and neat, as messy as a surging crowd making lots of noise as they celebrate the new life they see unfolding in front of their eyes.

Embrace the mess and see where God takes you this week.

Amen.

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