Sermon for 6th in Lent – Palm Sunday Year B

Readings: Isaiah 50:4-9a; John 12:12-16

i

In today’s passage from Isaiah 50:4-9a, the prophet speaks for a third (out of four) time about a servant – or should that be ‘about servanthood’? Sometimes the servant appears to be Israel as a nation, but on other occasions, such as here, the servant appears to be an individual.

In both instances, Isaiah depicts the servant as having to suffer for the sake of fulfilling his commission. The Lord has given the servant the message he must deliver, in my translation that reads: ‘the Lord has given me an instructed tongue’.

To be called by God is not something that can be shrugged off when new interests come along, or when difficulties arise. The call to faithfulness is ‘morning by morning’.

The servant must remain loyal even through the most brutal persecution and humiliation; he offers his back to those who beat him, he doesn’t hide his face from those who would pull out his beard and spit at him. It is difficult to read such verses on Palm Sunday without having Jesus in the forefront of our minds; it is no wonder the evangelists saw such a strong foreshadowing of Christ’s suffering in such a passage.

The servant does not run away, nor fight back, but accepts the pain in the belief that God will ultimately vindicate him: that his suffering will not be in vain.

ii

In John’s brief account of Palm Sunday we see Jesus heading towards such suffering, accepting it as part of his vocation to serve God.

We call it Palm Sunday, but only John’s gospel actually mentions palms. The other gospel writers refer to ‘branches they had cut’ (Luke doesn’t even mention branches, but only the cloaks they placed on the road in front of Jesus).

Palms were used to greet Judas Maccabeus about 150 years earlier when he returned in triumph to rededicate the temple in Jerusalem after defeating the Syrians (2 Maccabees 10:7).

Another instance of palms used as symbols of national celebration and military victory is when they were briefly used on the coins of the later Bar Kochba revolt against Rome in 132 -135 AD. And according to tradition Levi had been given a palm branch as a sign of his authority over all of Israel.

Putting down cloaks on the road to be walked over was a sign of pledging loyalty to a new king. In 2 Kings 9:11-13 the army commanders lay their garments in front of Jehu who has just been proclaimed king.

The greeting shouted by the crowd is a quotation from Psalm 118:25-26. This psalm belongs to a collection of psalms (113 – 118) known as the *Hallel* psalms, which means ‘Praise God’ psalms.

This psalm and these verses were usually used at the Feast of Tabernacles, rather than the Passover, but again they had greeted the conquering Judas Maccabeus with these words 150 years earlier. Clearly, they were welcoming Jesus as their warrior- Messiah.

It is true that Jesus had deliberately chosen to enter the city that day over the Mount of Olives riding a donkey as a deliberate act to fulfil the messianic prophecy of Zechariah 9:9:

See your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

So Jesus wasn’t denying he was the Messiah; it is just that he was not the sort of Messiah they thought they were greeting. Donkeys may be seen in many western countries as somewhat ridiculous animals, best suited to children visiting the beach, but in ancient times they were treasured beasts of burden and wealth and were used to signify a king or army commander approached in peace, rather than in battle.

In 2 Samuel 19:26 the royal prince Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan of Saul’s royal lineage, unsure of his safety in approaching King David, contemplates approaching David riding on a donkey as a sign he comes in peace.

It may be easy for us to see how blind the crowd was in failing to interpret Jesus’ intentions. It is clear to us now that Jesus had no intention of playing the role they had envisaged for him. He was not going to be their warrior king in the mould of Judas Maccabeus. How could they have ever supposed otherwise?

Yet the danger of misrepresenting Jesus did not stop with the crowds of Holy Week. We are all prone to laying upon Jesus the expectations of our own culture, politics, or denominational bias. Allowing Jesus to be Jesus has always been a supreme challenge. People demand of Jesus things that he has never promised and has no intention of giving. Some people lose faith because Jesus did not give them what they thought he would – but how well did they really know Jesus? Were their dreams ever more than wild and misplaced fancies?

One lesson we can heed from Palm Sunday is look at Jesus – but look carefully and closely. Know him as he is, not as you imagine him to be. Close study of the scriptures and the wisdom of the great scholars of the Church are there to guide you. Do not become like the Pharisees, ‘blind guides’: ‘If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit’ (Matthew 15:14).

iii

It’s not exactly clear how well even the disciples understood the true nature of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem that day. We recall that Peter pronounced that Jesus was the Christ at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:16), but he immediately got it terribly wrong when suggesting he would prevent Jesus from going to his death in Jerusalem.

Jesus may have spoken about his approaching death several times to his disciples as well as saying that on the third day he would rise again, but there is evidence that the disciples failed to fully grasp any of this until after the resurrection.

Here in this passage, we read: ‘At first the disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realise that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him’ (John 12:16).

Failing to understand Jesus, having a wrong picture of what is going on, is no new experience for Christians. The disciples got it wrong much of the time prior to the resurrection and the Early Church we see depicted in Paul’s letters and other NT epistles does not paint an entirely flattering picture of unadulterated cohesion and comprehension either.

Perhaps that is the nature of our faith. As Paul once said: ‘Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known’ (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Perhaps we should expect to live much of our Christian lives somewhat in the dark, unable to fathom the mysterious depth of the purposes of God. You all know the old line: ‘God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform – at least he has me fooled most of the time’.

It is often difficult to read the signs of the times. We often struggle to comprehend what God is doing in the world and Church around us. We are all prone to claim to understand the mind of God far more than we have any right to do. But this is the nature of faith. Faith is not knowledge. Faith is not certainty. Faith is not guarantee.

Whilst we have the unassailable bedrock of our faith in Christ the only Son of the Father, crucified and risen, that does not give us insight into all the ways of the Spirit even within our own lives, let alone, throughout the whole world and through all of history. You would not be the first nor last Christian to wonder just what God is doing in your life and what God is doing about the state of the Church.

Some hesitate to commit because they cannot cope with the uncertainty. They want to know more before they take it on. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah had to submit himself to the pain and torture in the belief that God would vindicate him – not the guarantee that God would do so. So too, Jesus submits himself to the cross in the belief that God would raise him up again. So too in our turn, we submit to the challenges and the cost of discipleship in faith, based on what we do know of Christ from the past in our lives and the lives of those believers who have gone before us.

Some things we will get wrong. In some things God will surprise us. But ultimately, when we have finished the race, we will look back and see the full picture and understand the mysterious workings of the Almighty, the Father who sends his Son into a baying crowd riding a donkey, on a colt, the foal of an ass.

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