Sermon for 6th in Lent Year C

Readings : Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 19:28-40.

i

I once processed out of church just behind the pope. Admittedly, it was quite a way behind, but I was on that one occasion in the following group of ecumenical clergy leaving St Paul’s Outside the Walls after the annual ecumenical vespers to mark Christian Unity week.

Pope Benedict had walked the length of that huge church in Rome down the central aisle. Hundreds left their seats and strained to touch him as he walked by, smiling benignly, as he left the church. Others stretched forward with cameras and iphones to capture the moment. As a Methodist and New Zealander, I could not help but notice the surprising scrummaging skills on display as nuns fought their way to the front of the cheering, clapping crowds of worshippers.

Such was the frenzy of the people that when we ecumenical guests were invited to follow His Holiness, who had just disappeared from sight at the far end of the church, I, and the Anglican bishop and a Lutheran minister were also cheered to the rafters, fingers straining towards us and phones and cameras clicking wildly. I’m sure they didn’t have a clue who we were, but by then they didn’t seem to care. They had just seen the pope, up close. That was what mattered.

Obviously I don’t know for sure, but I always had the impression that Pope Benedict found the public appearance side of his ministry a bit of a trial. I imagine he preferred the small group, the individual in depth encounter to the super-star role thrust upon him by public appearances.

But being public property is part of the Church’s calling.

The parables speak often of the hidden influence of the Church at work silently, unseen and at first unnoticed. I have in mind the parables of the leaven in the lump, the salt of the earth, the seed growing secretly and so on. That is all true.

Yet there is also a public face to the Church as well as its private, family face: The parables of the light set on a lampstand and the city set upon a hill come to mind. There are times when there can be no hiding away. When our personal relationship with Jesus Christ cannot be a private matter, but becomes public property to be used and abused by whoever wishes to have a go.

Jesus preached and healed and taught in a public fashion, but so often he was able to retreat from the crowds who wanted to make him king by force as after the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:15) or who wanted to lay hands on him to do him harm such as when they picked up stones in Jerusalem ready to stone him (John 10:39-40).

Much of his teaching seems to have been to his gathered disciples away from the crowds, such as in Matthew 13:36 when Jesus privately explains the parable of the weeds.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus hands himself over to the public. He has prepared his disciples for this moment, helping them through his teaching and his deeds to understand who he is; but what will the crowds make of him?

We may think being famous and public property is wonderful. For some it is. For some celebrities it is mostly like Palm Sunday when the world seems to be on your side, but few celebrities get through their career without a few moments like Good Friday when the world turns against you.

To be in the public eye seems glamourous, but it can be crucifying. Politicians pose for photos with family and pets to try and evoke empathy from the public as just another person like the voters, but before long can have their wardrobe criticised, their sexual peccadillos laughed at and if you’re as unfortunate as a leader of the UK Labour Party, even have the way you eat a bacon sandwich held up as a reason for rejection.

It’s no wonder so many Christians today want to have a private faith, even in the West where we do not face the danger of death, torture or destruction of home and business like many Christians face in other parts of the world. Today’s secular society is always ready to have a dig, always prone to sneer, always ready to set up an Aunt-Sally of an argument to deride the Church - never mind the times when we deserve to be taken to task.

If it could always be like Palm Sunday, many of us would go for that, but we don’t want to face Good Friday and so we keep our heads down.

Jesus couldn’t keep his head down and keep faith. Neither can we hide our light under the bushel forever. There are times when we simply have to stand up and be counted, come what may.

ii

Sometimes you end up getting involved when you haven’t chosen to lift your head above the parapet at all. Sometimes it’s other people or just circumstances that draw you in from the periphery. There are an awful lot of people standing pulpits, serving in soup kitchens, or tending the wounds of the refugee who never expected or planned to end up where they are.

Have you ever thought about the family which owned the donkey?

Presumably they had some contact with Jesus and his disciples, because they dutifully let their donkey go when the disciples said “the Lord” has need of it (Luke 19.34), but for all we know they hardly knew Jesus.

What will you do if the Lord suddenly turns up in your life and says he needs something of you? How much would you give?

I heard recently of a child asking her teacher whether Jesus ever gave the donkey back. We don’t know the answer to that one. He promised to send it back according Mark 11:3.

But it does pose the question whether we give to the Lord only if we think we are going to get it back, or do we offer what we have, despite the cost?

There is no getting away from it this week; obedience is costly. For Jesus to remain obedient to his Father’s will, he had to pay the ultimate price.

This is also true today for some Christians in places like northern Nigeria, Libya, Egypt and Iraq. They may go to church on a Sunday without being sure they will be able to come home again. Faith is often public even if it would be easier to keep it private.

In those formerly Christian countries in the West, the days are gone when expressing a Christian faith or following a Christian vocation brought any sort of public admiration or respect. People today are more likely to be indifferent or suspicious and think you might be a little odd or a bit simple-minded.

Yet Christ had done only good things to people – and they still did away with him. Our readings from Isaiah and Philippians tell the same story.

Isaiah is one of the so-called Servant Songs in which the servant remains faithful and delivers his message of comfort and hope to a downtrodden people despite the humiliation and the torture of those who would beat him, insult him, pull out his beard and spit in his face. He trusts God will stand by him and vindicate him in the end.

This same pattern is expressed in the form of a Christian hymn in Philippians 2:5-11 which tells the story of Christ’s obedient self-abasement even to his death on the cross and the subsequent vindication of that suffering through the resurrection and ascension.

For any Christian today confronted with the prospect of suffering for their faith they need to hold on in the hope that God will also stand by them and that they also shall be vindicated at the end.

iii

It’s a pity our Gospel reading today finished at verse 40. Going on to verse 41 we see a detail found only in Luke’s version of Palm Sunday: as Jesus approached the city in the hour of his triumphal entry – Jesus wept.

He might have had good reason to weep for himself, but instead, he wept for Jerusalem. He wept for others.

Sometimes there is nothing you can do. Sometimes, despite your sacrificial obedience and your costly discipleship there is little to show for it.

The harvest is great indeed. The seed produces thirty, sixty even a hundred-fold; but such a lot of the seed is sown on stony ground, along the path or among the thistles.

Some Christians have been called to remain faithful through very barren days. Some have exercised ministry for a lifetime and only known a declining Church.

I sometimes envy John Wesley; he may have been chased out of places like Wednesbury with people baying for his blood, they may have thrown stones and spread malicious rumours about him in the press, but when he spoke people gathered in their hundreds and in their thousands. He saw a harvest for all his pain.

Most of Wesley’s followers may have been spared the Wednesbury riots, but have also never known the crowds of eager hearers at Gwennap pit or Hanham Mount.

Jesus wept not for himself, but for those who would not listen. They would pay a terrible price for following another Messianic dream and their whole city would come falling about their heads when they faced off against Rome. Despite their unbelief, Christ went on to the cross – weeping for them rather than for himself.

I worry that today we tend to weep only for ourselves. We are sorry for ourselves that the ground we sow is stony and the harvest we see is thin. Perhaps we feel resentful of those who have rejected our message and we are tempted to turn away from the pain of their indifference and seek solace in a private church of like-minded friends.

To turn away from the world because we are hurt is not the way of Christ. To be faithful to him we must still care enough for those who ridicule our faith to weep for them – unless of course we agree that that which they forsake is of no consequence?

But if the cross of Christ is life and health and all things good we should care enough to bear the pain and still carry on – for that is what Jesus did.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard April 2015**