

## **PALM SUNDAY 2<sup>nd</sup> APRIL 2023**

**By Rev. Dr, Fei Taule'ale'ausumai**

Since they revised the common lectionary, they have given us an option each year on this day to choose one or both of the following themes: Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday. I remember a time when there was no choice, we came to church on Palm Sunday. Those who were revising the lectionary came to the conclusion that too many Christians were opting for coming to church on Palm Sunday and celebrating Jesus triumphant entry into Jerusalem and then staying away until Easter Sunday, so they went from triumph to triumph and no suffering in between.

Wouldn't life be so easy if we could just choose to live in triumph and eliminate all the suffering that comes our way in life. If we had a choice to choose triumph over suffering, we would probably all choose triumphs no one likes to suffer. But the reality of life is that we do not necessarily always have a choice of course there are some misery guts who like to live life with the glass half empty instead of half full and everything seems to be a trial and so much hard work that it is even hard work watching and listening to them. This is not the suffering I am talking about.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan wrote a book together called "The last week" and it explores Holy Week. It is really interesting when they refer to the Palm Sunday text. There was actually Caesar's annual triumphant parade happening at the other end of town. Jesus hopping onto a donkey and entering into Jerusalem at the same time was a counter revolution to what was happening with the Romans. It's a bit like what happened last Saturday when Posie Parker prepared to speak to a women's movement when the 2,000 strong Trans community formed a counter revolution parade in competition to Posie Parkers.

They were successful and Posie Parker fled the country soon after giving a report to the Police. Jesus did not tolerate the powerful oppressing the powerless. His triumphant entry into Jerusalem was to stand in solidarity with the powerless and this he did with humility by riding a donkey.

Jesus was not entering a foreign city, nor entering the city of 'the Jews'. He was a Jew. He was entering the city which symbolised in his faith and his scriptures God's promise to Israel. To confront one's own faith and its traditions is painful. Thus, Jesus' approach to Jerusalem has become for many a symbol of the confrontation they must make, including the confrontation with themselves. The issues at stake are not ultimate control or power, though it is easy to give this impression:

The Jerusalem Road on Palm Sunday was not the road to freedom. It was the road to sacrifice. It was not the road to power; it was the road to humility. It was not the road to fame; it was the road to death. It was not the road the crowd thought; it was the road God had planned. It was Jesus' journey through the valley of death.

This road had taken a different turn, had led to a different destination. From triumphant entry into suffering servant.

A radically subverted model of power exercised in compassion challenges the temple system and Rome in its day and their equivalents in our own, around us and within us.

And so, when the road in Jerusalem changed from triumph to torture, Jesus stayed on it. When the shouting of the crowds moved from joy to judgment, Jesus stayed on it. When the mood of the mob switched from adoration to accusation, Jesus didn't flinch. When the road became rough, steep, and lonely, Jesus kept going.

All the way from the gates of Jerusalem, through the streets of the city, into the halls of judgment, down the dark alleys of hatred, out on the other side to the place of the skull. Jesus walked a road whose end he knew, whose destination was no surprise.

Isaiah writes perhaps 600 years before Jesus. Isaiah paints the portrait of the Suffering Servant as one whose back will be beaten, whose beard will be plucked out, whose face will be spat upon, and who will be mocked. And all those things happened to Jesus. All of that and more. And why?

Because the road that Jesus trod was the same road he had always walked. It was the road of humility, of love, of patience, of hope, of encouragement. It was the way of salvation, not the way of the empire. It was the way of God's realm.

And in a perfect world a man who did nothing but good, who relieved suffering, who comforted the mourning, who sat with the sorrowful, who ate with the outcast, who made the broken whole — in a perfect world such a man would be honored, praised, loved, and revered. After all, we give awards to people today who do those things. We call them Nobel Peace Prize laureates, or bestow on them humanitarian awards, or name parks or streets or schools in their honor. But for Jesus no such honors were forthcoming.

In their confusion, anger, and fear those who on Sunday had welcomed Jesus as their new messiah-to-be, by Friday had turned on him, weary of disappointment, weary of themselves, weary of their lives. And so tired of all they could not control, they cried out for vengeance they could control. If Jesus would not be their so-called king or messiah, then let's be rid of him, they said.

And though the weary turned away, Jesus did not. His word would sustain the weary, give rest to the restless, provide peace to the strife torn. His word was his life, his journey, his sacrifice, his violent death, his self-giving love. That is the road of this week. A road that takes us where Jesus has been. A road that leads to the cross.

It is important, however, not to cut the story so that it becomes a triumphalist celebration. In Matthew, as in Mark, whom Matthew closely follows here, this is the fateful entry which will take Jesus to his death. The dramatic irony which celebrates Jesus as king and reaches its climax with Jesus crowned king of the Jews on the cross, is beginning. The acclamation of the crowd is, therefore, at least ambiguous. They will, in Matthew, call Jesus' blood upon themselves and their children. That will have fateful consequences - according to Matthew in the destruction of the temple and the widespread slaughter of its inhabitants, according to subsequent history in the annals of anti-Semitic hate. The scene is full of danger and denseness. John's gospel shows some sensitivity to the problem when he adds the footnote that the disciples did not really understand what was happening or what it meant until after Easter (12:16).

So, I guess the question on the tip of my tongue is: will you choose to join the suffering servant this holy week as we celebrate the Passover on Maundy Thursday will we walk with Jesus through the valley of the shadow of death, mourn Jesus' death on the cross and wait expectantly for that resurrection Sunday morning of triumph?

There was a documentary called "the secret millionaire". It's about rich people developing a conscious for human suffering by stripping down to the basics and

moving into the slums and socio-economic realities of poor communities and families. They are not directed but seek out needy causes to observe and do volunteer work for. After ten days they turn up to say goodbye and tell them that they have not been honest with them that they are really a secret millionaire and then they give them a cheque for up to \$250,000 pounds for them to achieve the goals and pay the bills that they couldn't pay before he or she came along. The rich people in this documentary chose to join the suffering, whereas the suffering actually have no choice. That is not to say that rich people do not suffer, of course not, but from the basic day to day struggle for food and shelter there is a huge chasm of difference.

I remember being told that sometimes when we suffer God has chosen that particular moment in time because that is when we are the strongest. We often think of suffering as a time of weakness. I often look back on some of the difficult times in my life and I think wow I don't think I would have survived that had I not had an inner strength in me to get me through, or should I say a God of grace and compassion who carried me through. In our weakness we are made strong. We cannot walk around the periphery or skate in and out of suffering; we can only walk through to the other end. The Psalmist in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm knew full well what he was talking about when he wrote the words "Even though I walk through the valley" not around the valley or up and down the valley, he said even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil because thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. There cannot be a resurrection without a crucifixion.

This journey of Passion this week or Holy week is our opportunity to bring our burdens, the loads that are weighing us down to the foot of the cross too. As Jesus

prepares to empty all of himself kenosis in his self-giving act of love on the cross, so we must empty all ourselves during this time of Easter, a time for both Palm and Passion as well as agony and ecstasy. Good Friday approaches us, but so too does the resurrection of Sunday morning. There cannot be a resurrection without a crucifixion. This is our journey too.