

A Reflection from Revd Ali for Palm Sunday & Holy Week.

The Gospel readings for Palm Sunday start with the Palm Gospel, (Mark 11: 1 – 11) which tells the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He entered the city, not on a great charger leading an army of soldiers but on a young donkey. He wasn't greeted by the great and the good but by the ordinary folk who had heard about his preaching, teaching and the miracles he had performed. He wasn't welcomed into the Governor's palace but spend the night with his friends at Bethany. He wasn't the kind of Messiah that some were looking for. He wasn't a general to overthrow the Roman army of occupation. He wasn't a great political orator who would command the respect of the legal and ecclesiastical authorities. But still the people welcomed him. Perhaps in that moment of hosannas and palm leaves they glimpsed the reality of who Jesus really was. The Messiah who had come to offer himself as a sacrifice for all humanity. The Messiah who had come to be a bridge between humanity and God. The Messiah who came in love and peace to offer each and every one of us a new way of life. The Messiah who came to bring life to us all. Life in all its fullness. But during Jesus' last week before his crucifixion, the crowds faded away as the religious authorities sought Jesus' life. The hosannas soon turned into shouts of crucify!

Our Passion Gospel reading (Mark 15: 1 – 39) takes us through the events of Jesus' betrayal, arrest and crucifixion. On Maundy Thursday and Good Friday we will experience more of that betrayal, arrest and crucifixion, so this week I wanted to reflect a little more on what happened just before Jesus was arrested, his arrest and trial (Mark 14: 12 – 72). We know that Jesus had celebrated the Passover with his closest friends and at the end of the celebration he instituted the Eucharist - the transformation of the remembrance of the Passover to a celebratory meal that the church will continue until Jesus returns again. Then Jesus prepares his disciples for what is to happen next. (vs 12 – 26)

Jesus had been with his disciples for about 3 years. They had lived together, travelled together, been on a journey of ministry together. They had formed a deep bond of affection and trust. Jesus warned his disciples about what is about to happen to him - his trial, death and resurrection. Jesus understood that the disciples will respond to the stress of the events that are about to unfold in different ways. He tells them that they will fall away, 'when the shepherd dies the sheep will be scattered' (v 27) Sheep without their shepherd are directionless, can be harassed and helpless before danger. But Jesus knew that God was in control of the situation that will follow. He knew that everything was in God's hand, even in the betrayal that was to come. He reassured them that they won't remain scattered he will be with them again and go before them into Galilee (v 28). Jesus planted resurrection hope into their hearts to give them the strength to face what is coming.

Peter responded with an almost knee-jerk reaction- he declares even if they, meaning the rest of Jesus' closest friends, fall away I will not. Peter's declaration was made in love, but also in pride. Jesus knew Peter even better than he knew himself so he told Peter that he will deny Jesus not once but 3 times before the night was out. Peter didn't know or acknowledge his own weakness, he believed in his own strength rather than in Jesus' words. Jesus then led the friends out to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. Jesus understood what was to come and prayed with such intensity that his sweat was like drops of blood. He asked his closest friends to bear witness to his prayer and suffering as he wrestles with the knowledge of what is to come, the pain that he is to endure. He told them that his soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. He asked them to stay and keep watch with him. Jesus then moved a little way away from his friends, he asked God if there was a different way. Whether the path of pain, humiliation and death was the only option. He acknowledged that anything is possible for God, but in all, God's will be done. Jesus prayed, Abba Father. His words conveying both deep respect and intimacy. Affirming his relationship with his Father God and committing himself to God's will, not his own human instinct for self-preservation.

Sometimes, when we find ourselves in crisis we can doubt God's love, we can move away from God, create distance and lose intimacy. But here Jesus is showing us that he didn't doubt God's love or God's power and he affirms his commitment to carrying out God's will. In his humanity he acknowledged that he didn't want to face the desperate pain and humiliation of the cross but Jesus is prepared to accept God's will. He prayed not to avoid God's will but to have the strength to submit to God's will. When Jesus taught his disciples, and us to pray the words of the Lord's Prayer the first part of the prayer is for God's kingdom to come, for God's will to be done. A call for us all to listen to what God wants for our lives, what God wants us to do to serve God and serve each other. To understand that God's will is better than our own ideas. We can only, as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13, see in part but God can see the whole picture. God calls us all to use the Gethsemane prayer, yet not my will but what you will Lord. Trusting in God's love and God's purpose for our lives. That God has plans to prosper and not harm us.

After praying, Jesus returned to his friends and found them sleeping. Despite his request to watch with him. His friends fall asleep again. Maybe then had eaten too much at the Passover meal, maybe a little too much wine, maybe it was the burden of watching Jesus suffer that weighed heavily on their hearts. Whatever the reason, Jesus understands and tells them that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. But still he asks them and us to watch and pray. To understand and acknowledge our own weakness but to trust in and rest in the strength of the Lord. When we pray in the Lord's strength we are empowered to humble ourselves before God and to accept God's will and his purposes for our lives.

Jesus prayed until he had the strength to obey God's will completely. To accept his destiny, to offer himself completely for all of humanity and to fulfil his destiny. Before his time of prayer he was deeply distressed and sorrowful, after his prayer he had the courage to face what is to come. It is at that point that Judas confronts Jesus (v 43), betrays him with a kiss and Jesus is arrested. One of his friends tries to fight the armed guards of the religious authorities, cutting off his ear. But Jesus calls a halt to the resistance rebuking those who had come to arrest him. Jesus' ministry had always been in public, he had been teaching in the temple courts every day but they come to arrest him in the darkness rather than the light. Jesus, who was only guilty of teaching the waiting world about the kingdom of God was arrested like a violent criminal to fulfil the scriptures.

His friends, as Jesus had told them, abandon him. One even loses his clothes in the struggle to get away (v 51,52). This unidentified young man, it has been suggested, is Mark himself, giving only scant details of the other disciples' failure to follow Jesus he exposes his own failure, lack of faith and conviction. The disciples scatter, stripped of their prideful pretensions of courage and commitment and Jesus faces the journey to his trial alone. Jesus was brought before the Sanhedrin (v 53), the religious leaders and scribes. As if Jesus' arrest and trial wasn't dramatic enough, Mark also tells us the parallel story of Peter. As Jesus faces trial at the hands of the religious authorities, Peter faces his own trial in the courtyard outside. Peter, trying to make good on his commitment to Jesus to never forsake him is now being tested to his limits and as we know he fails. Jesus had predicted that Peter would betray him 3 times before the dawn and Peter fulfils that prophecy in his pain, distress and in fear for his own life.

Even though we have the benefit of knowing Jesus' story, it is still shocking to think of Jesus on trial – to our modern sensibilities we can't understand how someone who was such a good, kind and loving man – a man who had a heart for the poor, who taught his followers about the kingdom of God. Just how could he end up on trial, convicted and crucified. But Jesus was brought before the Sanhedrin. It is not a fair trial, they have already decided that Jesus was guilty, they just want to find a few witnesses to corroborate their decision and then they can pass sentence. But Mark tells us that they couldn't even find corrupt witnesses to agree on their story (v 56). But that doesn't stop them. The religious authorities had been plotting Jesus' death almost since the beginning of his public ministry. The joyful welcome of Jesus into Jerusalem by enormous crowds had just intensified their desire to be rid of him. Despite that, he had taught in the temple and initiated a new feast of remembrance of the love of God for humanity, and yet they still felt he had to die.

Despite being the ones who should have been closest to God, who should have understood the scriptural references to Jesus, who should have welcomed a new understanding of the covenant relationship between man and God, the religious authorities will stop at nothing to kill Jesus. Maybe their actions were driven by jealousy – this itinerant preacher from Nazareth was taking away their followers. His teaching would dismantle the complicated and lucrative regime of temple sacrifice. It might also have been that they saw Jesus as a political and theological threat. Politically, Jesus rejected their leadership and that threatened the status quo with the ruling army of Roman occupation. Theologically he was teaching a new understanding of a relationship for everyone with the God of love through Jesus. The Sanhedrin had political and religious power. Jesus' narrative of the kingdom of God challenged that power. God's love revealed through Jesus had a heart for the poor, the outsider, the refugee, the widow, the orphan – all groups who were powerless and without influence, especially with Rome. So instead of recognising Jesus as the Son of God, the hope of salvation for all humanity they convict him as a criminal.

As they bring charges against him, Jesus doesn't respond. He doesn't engage in a war of words with those who have already convicted him in their hearts and minds. When he is accused, Mark tells us that Jesus remained silent and made no answer. Jesus suffered in silence. Mark tells us that Jesus had remained silent about his identity during his ministry. He told demons not to make him known. He told the leper when he healed him not to tell anyone who he was. He told the blind man to go home and not tell anyone about him. He asked his disciples who witnessed the transfiguration not to talk about it until after his Passion. But Jesus' words and actions speak for him. People who met Jesus, who walked and talked with him declared him to be the Son of God, the Messiah. So the high priest asks him directly. 'are you the Christ the Son of

the blessed?'. The high priest is asking him if he is the Messiah, the one that God promised would come and set God's people free, restore God's kingdom and lead humanity back to right relationship with God.

Jesus answers, plainly and truthfully. He acknowledges his identity before the Sanhedrin, knowing that this will lead to his death. He tells them 'I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven' (v 62). Jesus combines scriptural passages in his answer (from Daniel 7 and Psalm 110) creating a powerful image for the members of the Sanhedrin. In the Hebrew scriptures riding on a cloud is reserved only for God, sitting at the right hand is reserved for the one with the highest honour. He tells them, with this one phrase that they are judging Godself, the judge of heaven and earth. The Sanhedrin do not understand so they condemn him, slap and spit on him. Jesus submits to their insults, their assault. He knows that it is all necessary to fulfil God's plan for the redemption of the world through his death and resurrection.

Whilst the drama unfolds in the house, in the courtyard Peter too faces his accusers (v 66 – 72). Peter is trying to fulfil his vow to Jesus to stand by him no matter what. But then a servant girl, the most unthreatening and powerless of people recognises him and tells the others in the courtyard that Peter was with Jesus. Peter understands the power dynamics at play within the house and denies being with Jesus. But the girl stands her ground and accuses him again and once again he denies it. When the others in the courtyard hear the conversation they look again at Peter and they too recognise him as a disciple of Jesus but once again Peter denies his Lord and Saviour, his friend and teacher, the one that he had previously declared as the Messiah. The one who he vowed to follow to the end. Peter, I really have a soft spot for Peter because he always seems to be the one who reacts in such a human way, Peter thought he was stronger than he was, in a moment of crisis he trusted in himself rather than in the strength of the Lord. Peter, when the cock crowed realised what he has done and weeps.

I wonder if that is something we can all relate to? When things get difficult, when we are challenged about our faith, now, when this awful virus is wreaking havoc in our world, do we too trust in our own strength rather than trusting in God?

When push came to shove, Peter denied Jesus to save his own skin. Jesus wasn't surprised, he knew Peter better than Peter knew himself. But in his compassion and love, after the resurrection Jesus sought Peter out, forgave him and empowered Peter to become the rock on which the church was built.

Jesus had been brought before the Sanhedrin during the night. The chief priests called for the Sanhedrin to convict Jesus and pass the death sentence, which they willingly gave.

We don't have a tradition of night courts in this country like they do in America. There is something about justice being seen to be done in the light rather than in the shadow of darkness. There has been some scholarly discussion about Jewish law and the legality of the Sanhedrin's actions that night. The law was clear that it forbade proceedings during the night that would lead to the death penalty. So when Mark tells us (15:1) that it was 'immediately in the morning', we realise that the Sanhedrin could not legally act until daylight, so as soon as the day breaks, the chief priests, elders and scribes hold their assembly to ratify their decision from the night before. As we know, they found Jesus guilty, bound him and delivered him to Pilate. If the Sanhedrin were to elicit action from Pilate they had to hand Jesus over as soon as possible. Time was short, the Sanhedrin were on a tight schedule. If they wanted to be free of Jesus by the Sabbath they needed to get the Roman forces on board and the crucifixion carried out quickly, because the body had to be removed from the cross and buried before sunset when the Sabbath began. The Sanhedrin needed to ensure that they conformed to the Deuteronomic laws, but they were also subject to Roman law.

The Roman occupying forces allowed some measure of local rule but retained authority over serious issues including capital crimes. Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, normally lived in Caesarea Maritima on the coast. But because it was the time of a major festival, Pilate had moved into Jerusalem with a contingent of soldiers to maintain law and order. It was the Governor who would need to pass judgement on Jesus to confirm the decision of the Sanhedrin.

Mark does not give us any details of the interaction between Pilate and the Sanhedrin just Pilate's interrogation of Jesus. We are not party to any politicking or deal making between them but Pilate's question to Jesus 'Are you the King of the Jews?' (15:2) makes it clear that the Sanhedrin have accused Jesus of seeking to become king – an act of treason that would require swift and brutal action from Rome's representative, Pilate.

Jesus had admitted to being the Messiah. The one that the people of God were expecting to deliver them from oppression. But they were expecting someone like the kings of history, like King David. Someone who would re-establish a sovereign nation and drive out the Romans. If the Sanhedrin had believed that Jesus was the Messiah then they surely should have supported him. But instead they accuse him of blasphemy. They saw Jesus as a threat to their power and authority and want him dead. Pilate would have no jurisdiction against a charge of blasphemy, treason however, was actionable under Roman law.

Jesus answers Pilate 'so you say'. Jesus' non-committal response avoided giving the false impression that he was establishing himself as king and rival to Rome, but also avoided denying his spiritual kingship. Jesus wasn't establishing an earthly kingdom but a spiritual kingdom that would outlast the might of Rome.

Pilate asked him again – have you no answer? The Sanhedrin had charged Jesus with many offences but Jesus doesn't defend himself. I wonder if Pilate sensed that the Sanhedrin are using him to implement their agenda, so he asks Jesus for a reason to acquit him. Jesus doesn't respond. He doesn't cooperate with the Sanhedrin or with Pilate, he is only concerned with his part in the divine plan. His time has come, he has accepted his destiny to "undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again".

Pilate tries one last time to avoid acquiescing to the Sanhedrin's desire to crucify Jesus. It was his custom to free a prisoner at major festivals (v 6), so he asks if the people if they want him to release Jesus. The Sanhedrin stir up the crowd to ask for Barabbas to be released instead. The irony being that Barabbas had been guilty of sedition and treason the very crimes that Jesus had been accused of. But that insurrection against Rome had made Barabbas popular amongst many of the Jews, so it doesn't take a lot to whip up the crowd to cry for his release.

In the face of the hue and cry Pilate asked the Sanhedrin what they would like to be done with Jesus (v 12). Their response is to call for his crucifixion. Pilate was in an adversarial relationship with the crowd, there is no room for debate. Pilate didn't want the crowd to get out of control and had no obligation to protect a non-Roman citizen, he understood that the actions of the Sanhedrin were driven by jealousy but he wanted to keep the crowd happy. He might have been sympathetic to Jesus; he might not have considered him a threat to Rome but he still handed Jesus over to be flogged and crucified (v 15).

Jesus, as a condemned prisoner had no rights. The soldiers were free to abuse him for their own entertainment. They clothed him in purple and placed a crown of thorns on his head and saluted him with the words, 'Hail, the King of the Jews'. Their actions designed to humiliate Jesus, purple the colour of royalty. The crown of thorns parodying the laurel circlet worn by the Caesar. They spit on him to parody the kiss of homage and mock him by kneeling before him. Then they led him out to crucify him (v 16 – 20).

Jesus was led on a long route through the city carrying the cross that would be the method of his execution. The lengthy route and public humiliation designed to show the people the result of criminal behaviour. The soldiers, not content with abusing Jesus, compel Simon of Cyrene to help carry the cross (v 21). Simon is described by Mark as the father of Alexander and Rufus, to identify Simon amongst the Christian Community. Jesus had earlier told his friends "Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" against his will, Simon becomes the first to literally do that.

Jesus was rejected by the religious elite, the ones who should have understood who he was. Jesus was rejected by the crowds who had so very recently welcomed him into Jerusalem, with hosannas and palm leaves. Jesus had been denied by one of his closest friends. Many of his other friends had scattered in fear for their own lives. He faced the long painful journey to his death after being mocked and humiliated by thuggish Roman soldiers. His only companion on the road was someone coerced into helping him bear his load. All of this Jesus endured for each of us. Jesus' life, words and actions had fulfilled all the prophecies about him. And now he had to face the ultimate sacrifice, made for all of humanity.

So, as we journey through Holy Week, coming close to our dear Lord's Passion, my hope and prayer for each of us is that the remembrance of those last, terrible few days brings us closer to the mystery of Easter. That by walking willingly with Jesus the way of the cross, we too will be brought into the joy of the resurrection and be empowered to share the great good news that is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In his name.

Amen