

The Power of Palms

Psalm 118: 19-24

Philippians: 2:5-11

Gospel: Matt. 21:1-11

Palm Sunday

Hello everybody. I hope you are keeping well - and staying safe. These are strange times - difficult times. But as the psalmist says, "This is the day that the Lord has made; Let us rejoice and be glad in it".

So, let us begin.

During the cold war, when the people of East Germany were under Soviet occupation, the pastor of St. Nicolas Church in Leipzig began to hold meetings for what started as a small group of about 10 people. These people would gather in the church on Monday evenings to pray for peace. At first the meetings took care to be apolitical, but by the middle of 1989, some preachers began making statements about injustices and lack of freedom in the state. As the church was one of the few places to get political information, more and more people began to gather. The word spread and soon thousands of people were attending prayer meetings in churches throughout Leipzig.

By October, government officials began to get nervous, and finally the order came from Moscow: peace prayers must be stopped. Troops were sent from other states with orders to shoot if necessary. Before a scheduled prayer meeting on October 9th, schoolchildren were told by their teachers not to attend the meeting, and rumours spread about hospitals stocking extra blood in case of trouble. As tension grew, so did the pressure on St. Nicolas' pastor to cancel the planned prayer meeting.

But he did something else instead. He sent word to the people to come not with weapons or gas masks, but with lighted candles. Many thought he was crazy – what use were candles against the Soviet army? Nevertheless, on the evening of October 9th, 1989, people carrying nothing but candles began to gather in and around St. Nicolas and other churches throughout Leipzig - in twos and threes, in tens and twenties, and eventually in tens of thousands. Their message was simple: "We, the people are praying for peace and freedom; come and join us".

As he watched the gathering crowd, the commander of the Soviet forces called Moscow for orders. There was no response. In the end, the troops stood down, without having fired a shot. A few weeks later, the Berlin Wall came down.

Two thousand years ago a man named Jesus of Nazareth entered Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, riding a donkey. In an imaginary historical

reconstruction of the day, the biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan (in their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels really teach about Jesus' final days in Jerusalem*) have presented the picture of a second procession entering from the opposite side of the city, led by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate riding a war horse, and heading a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Their purpose was to maintain law and order during the Jewish festival of Passover. Jesus' procession proclaimed the Kingdom of God. Pilate proclaimed the power of the Roman Empire.

The crowd that greeted Jesus was as ill prepared as the people of Leipzig. Pilate's soldiers wore armour. Jesus' people wore simple cloaks. The soldiers had swords and spears. Jesus' people had only branches which they had cut from trees. How could the people stop or sway the powers of world empire with only branches in their hands?

They couldn't. Nor did they try. Instead they lay their cloaks and branches on the ground, trusting in the good will of others. They shouted "Hosanna", which we may interpret as praise, but whose real meaning is "Save us". This was a peaceful protest, by people longing for a better life after many years of often brutal Roman rule.

History has seen many such peaceful protests. In recent times leaders such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu have shown the power of such movements. But there is also considerable risk and no guarantee of success. Revolutions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia ended in bloodshed. In 1919, the massacre of peaceful civilians in Amritsar, India left hundreds dead, including children. And just months before the Leipzig protest, hundreds were mown down in Tienanmen Square in China. Mercy and justice does not always prevail.

The people of Leipzig and the first Palm Sunday crowd were very much aware of that. Candles and tree branches are no match for world powers. But the powers of the world are no match for God's mercy and love.

Today, the world is facing an invisible adversary in the coronavirus. We find ourselves waiting, watching and worrying. In our isolation there is fear, but there is also the promise of new life, and the presence of a love that binds all things together and conquers even our worst fears.

The church building is closed, but hearts are open wide. People are finding new ways of serving God through service to neighbours and others. And God's grace is all around us. We can see this in the service and sacrifice of the hundreds of health care workers and others on the front lines, who are risking their lives to care for the sick. We can see it in the delivery drivers, the supermarket workers, and in friends and neighbours whose small gifts and good wishes remind us that we are not alone.

We are now entering the holiest week in the Christian year. Holy Week reminds us that while suffering and death are real, equally real is our God who not only walks and suffers with us, but who loves us enough to die for us, thus bringing us through death into new life. This is the hope that lies at the heart of our faith. So, as we move through this next week let us remember that God is not finished with us. His presence is with us. And he calls us to join in his work in the world in whatever way we can, relying not on the power of what we may carry in our hands, but on the love and mercy of the One who carries us.

May God bless us all.

Amen

Martha Taft Golden, Reader

Sermon for Palm Sunday that was planned to take place at St Mary's Church, Holmbury, on 5 April 2020 and is, instead, delivered online.

5th April 2020