**SERMON FOR PALM SUNDAY | 28.03.2021**

**Isaiah 50: 4-9a; Philippians 2: 5-11; Episodes from St Luke’s Gospel chapters 19, 20 and 21**

**It was both honest – and horrific – at the same time. In an interview reflecting on the alleged murder of Sarah Everard by a serving policeman, a retired sergeant was remembering an incident when he was just a cadet, so many years ago now. One day a black man had been brought into the police station and was taken down to the cells. As a cadet it was his job to go down with the group of officers – only to find that no sooner had the man been pushed into the cell than he was set upon by the escorting party and beaten up pretty severely.**

**With tears in his eyes, we heard how this policeman, then a cadet, had done nothing. Despite the pleas from the arrested man he just stood there, frozen to the spot.**

**Of course he was the most junior person there, and there were lots of other police involved. He might well have got into trouble himself; at best he would have been ignored. But the incident has never left him, all these years on.**

**Today, whether in Church or watching at home, we are bystanders too: watching at a distance these eight scenes that lead up to Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper. And my question is: what impact do these events have on us?**

**As we enter into Holy Week, let’s take a brief look at each of them.**

**The first takes us to the tipping point: after three years preaching and teaching - somehow escaping from being arrested several times and avoiding the heat of the conflict - Jesus tells the disciples that this is the last big journey: they are making for the final show down in Jerusalem. But even this town is hostile territory. This is Samaria and no Jew was welcome there. As the tension rises, instinctively the disciples lash out: *shall we call down fire from heaven to destroy them?***

**Is that our reaction too when we are being got at? When people don’t understand us or we are upset or out of our depth do we lash out? Jesus’ patience is amazing under all this pressure. He tells the disciples to respect those who are hostile to them - and to be kind.**

**In the second scene, Jesus is with the people who had cared for him best throughout the last three years: Martha, Mary and Lazarus. There is more than one version of this story in the Gospels but here it is Mary who pours precious oil on his feet as he ate. Outrageously extravagant, but done with such love.**

**Sadly it doesn’t take long for Judas to jump in and attempt to show her up with faux indignation: *couldn’t this money have been used for the poor* he asks? We might have asked the same question: with limited resources shouldn’t we shut up shop here and spend it all on the poor?**

**We know that Judas was being a hypocrite: he was already taking money for himself out of the common purse. But Jesus’ words apply to us too: *you will always have the poor with you – and you must look after them. Yet you don’t! Save your self-righteousness for some other time and find a way - any way – of showing me that you love me more than anyone else… This was her way: what is yours?***

**In the third scene, Jesus shares the Lord’s Prayer. We too could do with asking him for help with our praying. We don’t find it easy and we are often lost for words. That is why he gives us these to make our own. We know them by heart: but that isn’t enough. Don’t let’s stand idly by: let’s use them. Anywhere.**

**I love this fourth story. Zacchaeus was all prepared to be a bystander. As a tax gatherer, no one wanted him in their company and so he shins up a tree. He wanted to see Jesus but he wanted to do it secretly, where no one would see him, where no one would cross-question him or show him up. Does that sound familiar? Don’t we often try to hide from the limelight?**

**But of all the people there Jesus knows that it is this man who needs him. Even up there in the tree out of sight, he isn’t out of God’s sight. *Come down,* says Jesus, *we have work to do!* And Jesus is reminding us that we can’t leave anyone out: he was the shepherd who went in search for the one in a hundred who needed him: the little people, the over-looked people, the ones who are too shy or too embarrassed to ask for help. Jesus looks up and there is one such. We must too.**

**And here we are, Palm Sunday and Scene 5. How does Jesus enter the city? On a horse like a military commander: *look at how grand I am?* No, on a donkey, a quarter of the size - and un-ridden.**

**Why that last detail? I don’t have a clever explanation but the notion that comes to my mind is that there is a connection between the innocence of Jesus and that unridden donkey. That is why we try to reach out to people who have never had the chance to explore the life and teachings of Jesus. They don’t have all the baggage that the rest of us carry around: it is all new and exciting and Jesus is there to show what new life is all about. As bystanders, can we go there too, in our own minds, winding back the layers that assume we know it all? Look, here is Jesus’ gift: something utterly fresh and transforming.**

**Three more snippets, and here is the first: the Temple cloisters with all the noise and bustle of Smithfield Market, the trade that went with the selling of animals for sacrifice. And what is Jesus demanding? In the face of such arrant pollution of this place of prayer: *don’t just stand there, do something!***

**Then - as now – we all need a place to pray, a place to let God’s peace soak into our hearts and minds. That has been our policy here at St James’ too: to offer this Church as a small sanctuary for people to drop into. And there is barely an hour when there isn’t someone in here.**

**It comes at a cost to us, of course. Things do get taken occasionally and we have to be careful to lock up anything of value. But that palls into insignificance when compared with the value to our community of a space where there are no questions asked and people can just unwind in God’s presence. Jesus is right to storm in there and kick out the traders. There is a time and a place for most things – but the Temple was neither the time nor the place. In that moment was he not right to be angry and active – on behalf of his Father? Do we get angry enough when things are wrong?**

**There are times to just stand and watch of course. How can we know what to think otherwise? In the seventh scene, Jesus is deliberately watching. And there, just briefly, he sees a woman putting two tiny coins into the treasury pots: her stewardship money.**

**She is poor and her contribution can’t be much. But Jesus doesn’t say: *don’t give.* What he says to anyone willing to listen is that God sees into our hearts - and what is looking for is love and generosity. If we don’t give at all we clearly have neither. If we don’t give much when we can afford to give, the same applies.**

**Like Mary’s perfume, what appears to be a waste is nothing of the sort. We can’t stand idly by – or try to justify our meanness. Jesus is pointing, not to the poor widow as such, but to an example of the generosity of God. *Freely you have received: freely give.***

**And finally the man with the pot of water. It’s another story of the way ‘God knows’! He is ahead of us all the time and he has set things in motion that we have no idea about. Our job is to follow the leads, follow our hunches, to trust that God knows what is about, to take risks even when the evidence is a bit thin on the ground. Listening to God: going where he takes us – to the Upper Room, into the future where he is sure to be…**

**There are all kinds of reasons for just standing and not getting involved: idleness and fear being just two of them though in the case of the event I started with, prejudice must also be a third.**

**So two small comments caught my eye this week and I finish with them now. The first was from Mina Smallman, the first black Archdeacon in the Church of England. Naturally she was keen to offer her support to Sarah Everard’s family; murder is murder. But she did just wonder why the outcry for Sarah was so very much greater than that for her two adult daughters of colour who were murdered after a party in a country park last June. Does someone’s colour, or class, or demeanor affect the way we respond?**

**But I leave you with the remark from the comedian Frank Skinner who said that in his view it is easier to come out as an alcoholic in the Britain of today than it is to come out as a Christian…**

**From this Palm Sunday on, I hope we are willing to play our part by coming out of the shadows as bystanders, leaving aside our inclination to hide, our unwillingness to get involved and our prejudices big and small, and are willing to walk in faith with Jesus - wherever he leads.**