

SERMON FOR PALM SUNDAY | 02.04.2023

Isaiah 60: 3-8; Philipian 2: 5-11; St Matthew 26: 11-54

The story of Palm Sunday seems so straightforward; despite the looming black clouds and the warnings of his own disciples – Jesus set his mind on travelling back to Jerusalem. While he doesn't know the details of the deal that Judas had struck with the chief priests and the eye watering amount of money they are prepared to pay for his capture, Jesus knows that there is an inevitability about this journey and he tries to make sure the apostles are as aware of what was happening as possible.

But Jesus soon realised what we can so easily see from the pages of this story, that the disciples were still stumbling around in the dark; for three years they have always been at least one step behind and now, when everything is coming to a head, they are even less ready for what is to come.

In fact, on that pre Passover weekend, I suspect they would probably have been pretty encouraged by the shouts of the crowds as Jesus entered through the Shushan Gate sitting astride his donkey, surrounded by singing crowds waving the fronds from the palm trees which had been so hastily torn down for the occasion! Perhaps, just perhaps – the disciples might have reasoned – the ordinary people in the city were now able to see Jesus for who he was, that they had recognised him as the Messiah, the chosen Son of God. Wouldn't it be great if the Twelve could be on the winning side for once? Hosanna, they sang with the crowds: it's all going to be great!

And if we aren't careful we can get lulled into the same mid set, but for very different reasons. We know that Jesus is going to be arrested, tried and executed in the most barbaric way imaginable. And because we know the story so well - having heard the story umpteen times before - we can lose some of the sheer injustice of what was taking place. Just because Jesus is prepared to die doesn't take anything away from the appalling things that were about to be done to him.

To make this point more clearly, let me remind you of one of the scenes that takes place between Palm Sunday and the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday. It is the time when Jesus is standing in the street and his attention is caught by an older woman who is about to put something into the donations pot left by the great Temple gates. As Jesus watches, she takes two tiny coins and quickly drops them in. And Jesus tells us that she is so poor this is the only money she has.

How many times have we heard this story and been told in sermons how selfless the woman was and how much she must have loved God to give all that she had. How often have we been compared with her for the miserly way we support the Church because what we give isn't a patch on the sacrifice made by this anonymous old lady?

But perhaps there is another way of reading this story. Fr Jack Dalrymple, in his wonderful book 'The Cross is a Pasture', suggests a very different interpretation. Instead of just commending the older woman for her faithfulness and generosity, perhaps what Jesus is doing is attacking the Temple, its priests and all that it stood for because those two tiny coins represented the only chance of the woman had being able to eat, to survive. What right had they to take this money from her – to be spent on goodness knows what? By paying her tax to the Temple she was actually condemning herself to starve to death.

Like Jesus himself, she was prepared to pay the ultimate price for doing what was right. But it shouldn't have been like that: this woman shouldn't have been required to die.

It is exactly a year since Russian troops were forced out of Bucha after 33 days of occupation. What the returning Ukrainians discovered there shocked the world: evidence of executions, rapes and torture. Bodies of civilians lay where they had fallen, beside their bicycles, in their cars, on the sides of roads, in yards, buildings and homes. Ukraine puts the civilian death toll in this small town at 461. 14 killed each day.

President Zelensky, visiting Bucha this week, said "On these streets the world saw Russian evil". International teams are currently investigating possible war crimes. Moscow, has, of course, denied everything.

Helena Vezhichanyan, 50, talking to western reporters, said how the Russian invasion had traumatised her. "I simply don't feel the same since the war broke out."

After the Russians had finally left, she volunteered to work through the records in the Bucha morgue, trying to reunite relatives. Tears came to her eyes as she described watching a son recognise the face of his father, or the parents of a young girl who had been raped many times and then killed. "It was heart-breaking," she said. "I didn't know them personally but at that moment I felt like we were one big national family."

Not surprisingly Helena realised that she might need some kind of therapy and she was encouraged to take part in something called 'neurone drawing'. "I really needed some help", she said, "I wasn't stable after everything I had seen." But even in the peace of the therapy studio she couldn't, at least to start with, draw in colour. "I felt my whole world had collapsed: it had no colour, no hope. All I could feel was pain. The hurts went so deep. Could there be any way out of this endless despair? But I also knew I had to face these issues head on. There was no running away from the pictures in my head. And it has helped to speak to people who have had the same experiences and to know I'm not alone," she said. "I am gaining more confidence in myself and believing in people again."

And that is what Jack Dalrymple is saying to us on this Palm Sunday. We can't just rush through the Passion story in some anodyne kind of way. Like Bucha it is full of violence - the grossest injustice. Nor is it enough to just say how grateful we are to Jesus for dying for us; we need to feel the depth of his pain, the depth of the pain of the old woman by the Treasury tax office too, and to say to ourselves: this was total evil. It requires of us a real emotional engagement not just a brief, light, mental reflection before we move on.

Of course we know there is to be a happy ending. Easter is just a week away. But first let's recognise, with Christians everywhere, the scale of the battle fought for each one of us. In the words of the 17th century poet, Samuel Crossman:

My song is love unknown, my Saviour's love to me,
love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be.
O who am I, that for my sake, my Lord
should take frail flesh and die?