



Sermon by the Right Reverend John Stephens
Palm Sunday of the Passion 2022
April 10, 2022
Episcopal Visit to the Parish of St. Titus, Oakridge

It is so great to be here at St. Titus Church this morning. This is the first time for me to be here after your name change (*The parish was formerly known as St. Matthias and St. Luke up until the fall of 2020*). I know that it was a complicated decision to change the name of this church and to consider what that means in relation to the future of your ministry and your hopes and prayers for this parish. St. Titus was a contemporary of St. Paul in the early days of the formation of the Church and this seems the perfect patronal saint for a church. In the world of today as we rethink how we are to live the gospel in our time and our place, St. Titus seems an excellent example of one who understood much about church formation and development, about how to live out faith in Jesus Christ and grow and develop the Church. Well done on this change. Thank you as well for all your hard work over the past two years as we have lived in this pandemic. It has been a difficult time for all of society, and churches are no exception. It has been stressful trying to pivot and consider and reconsider how to be a community when it has been so difficult to gather. Thank you as well to your vicar, Marion, for her work in all of this and for her work as your priest and also as the Regional Dean for this Deanery of Oakridge. Marion is a deeply pastoral, kind, capable and gifted priest. I am grateful to her for all that she does. It is good to be with you.

Quite honestly, the reading of the Passion of Jesus is hard to take... and I have heard it read many times over the years. Now I am aware that we have peeked ahead and know how everything will turn out, but at the same time those words and those images are hard to take. Jesus, our messiah, our teacher, our friend, our sibling, our mentor, our companion,

our saviour is handed over to the deepest and darkest violence that exists in this world and left to fend for himself. How could this happen, we might still ask. How could this response to the life of any human being ever happen, we might ask? But as I pondered the image of Jesus on the cross in preparation for this Sunday, I also began to ask myself, "How could this kind of violence continue to happen in the world even now?" How much has changed since that day of crucifixion of long ago? Where do we continue to crucify and sacrifice those things to which God is calling us and even pleading with us to live to the fullest? Where do we continue to push aside those things that are calling us to be all that God created us to be, to settle for things that pale in any comparison?

The images that we have all seen of the invasion of Ukraine remind me so much of this as well. As brutal bombing and destruction and disregard for the sanctity of human life continues in this region of war, and sadly in a number of different other areas, like Afghanistan, Ethiopia, the Middle East to name only a few; clearly, we continue to destroy and maim and murder the image of God in the name of power or greed or dominance. We in this world continue to live with blatant disregard for what we are doing to this planet as it continues to grow warmer and sea levels rise and the climate in all places continues to change, and the poorest on this planet will once again be hit the hardest. We continue to see drug overdose deaths in this region of Canada so that about 6 people each day will die and yet little is done to bring hopeful change. How much have we changed since the violence of the crucifixion so many years ago? What do we need to learn from that image of Jesus, that image of God, that image of our hope for this world being nailed to a cross?

I don't know if you noticed but the words of the second criminal, the one who was crucified alongside Jesus, the words that he cried out to Jesus could be words that we might utter as well as we remember Christ's death on the cross and observe our world of our time. As he saw the violence afflicted against Jesus, as he saw Jesus experience the jeering of the crowd and the soldiers, as he saw this famed rabbi taunted and hated far beyond measure, this criminal knew that there was more going on than met the eye. This Jesus was not just being killed he was being destroyed. Jesus had clearly said too much, invoked too much, challenged too much, loved too much. And so, his voice needed to end. But this criminal knew too that there was something more to this Jesus, his words and his actions revealed a kingdom beyond this violence and beyond this world. The hatred and viciousness of this barbaric execution could not end what Jesus had begun. And so, the criminal said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." They are words that we too continue to say. Words that speak to our own cries of despair, our concerns, doubts, fears and questioning of what God is asking of us. Remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Now Jesus' kingdom seems to mean many things to many people. Some see it as referring to life after death; that place where we go when we die. And that is partly true... but only partly true. For the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, that Jesus often spoke about while he walked on this planet, really was referring to something that is both about this world and a world to come. He was speaking about how we live in this world and how that carries on in the life to come. He used gentle and simple metaphors to help us discover this mustard seed or this yeast or this pearl of great value that we cannot live without. It is, we discover, the ground on which all of life is built. For the true purpose of life is built not

on violence or power or selfishness or pride or wealth or status but where we know the forgiveness of God, the love of God, the compassion of God in our soul, in the most sacred part of ourselves and let that influence how we live and move and have our being. We discover that life is not about destroying one another or getting ahead or gaining more belongings but in fact is about our relationship with God and other people and ourselves. Where we find that still-point, where God is known in our souls and in our neighbours and in this world. This is the kingdom and when we have spent time with it and allowed it to transform us, we discover that God's love is eternal, that God's love never ends; the kingdom never ends.

Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan remind us that in the year 30 A.D. there were two processions that entered into Jerusalem on this day. Two grand parades, if you will, entered the holy city. Two completely different exhibitions of the word kingdom.

The first one was the one that we just walked ourselves, following the example of Jesus and the crowd of long ago with palm branches, palm crosses and chanting and singing. We just joined in, as Christians have for centuries, remembering the celebrations as huge crowds in Jerusalem welcomed and honoured the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth. It was mostly a peasant crowd, the people of hard work and simple lifestyle who welcomed Jesus. Real people who knew the holiness of God touching their lives and their priorities. This was a show of compassion, of hope, of God's reign, of faith in a God of love. This was about the kingdom of God; an upside-down world as to who is in charge, what is most important and who are the ones who are blessed.

The second one was a very different procession indeed, that of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor entering the city of Jerusalem. He would have been at the head of a column of cavalry and soldiers. It was all about the power of the empire, a show of force, military might, a show of control. For Pilate would have demonstrated for this feast of Passover that Rome was very much in charge. Make no mistake he was making it clear who held the power.

Two processions. One based on the kingdom of heaven; one based on the empire of Rome. One based on who God saw as blessed; one based on power and control. One based on commandments centred on love; one based on violence and force and military strength. One based on justice and compassion; one based on ego and money and squashing opposition. One based on Jesus coming in the name of God; one based on Pilate having complete domination. Wealth, riches, power, violence, destruction, no-nonsense versus blessed are the peacemakers for they are called children of God or blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. Two vastly different processions, two vastly different kingdoms, two vastly different priorities. Which procession are we in?¹

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in *The Last Week* page 30