



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens

Palm Sunday Year A April 2, 2023

Episcopal Visit to St. John the Evangelist, North Vancouver

I am delighted to be with you here at St. John's for this Palm Sunday. I am grateful for the ministry of this parish that reaches far beyond your four walls. I am grateful for the very good work of your rector, Patrick: a gifted and talented priest who is appreciated in the diocese as much as he is appreciated here. It is good to have Archdeacon Peggy here this morning as our Deacon, someone well known in this parish. I am also grateful to your treasurer and the Diocesan Treasurer, Bob, for all that he does in the diocese; it is an incredible amount of work which he does with great capability and commitment. It is good to be here with all of you as we focus on the central week of our faith: Holy Week leading to Easter.

John O'Donohue once wrote: "Within the grip of winter, it is almost impossible to imagine the spring. The grey perished landscape is shorn of colour. Only bleakness meets the eye; everything seems severe and edged. Winter is the oldest season; it has some quality of the absolute. Yet... beneath the surface of winter, the miracle of spring is already in preparation; the cold is relenting; seeds are waking up. Colours are beginning to imagine how they will return."¹ You can hear John O'Donohue's words on a number of levels. They are speaking, of course of a change in the season... but they are also speaking about our lives and what it means to walk in this world: seeking spring even in the midst of winter.

For if you have lived very long on this planet you will have learned a few things about finding ways to navigate through all that will come your way. You will know that life

¹ From *To Bless the Space Between Us* by John O'Donohue

is filled with times of enormous joy but right beside them can be intense challenges. You know well that there are moments of grief and pain as well as celebrations and extraordinary happiness. You know that if you risk loving another there are mountain peaks and valleys in any and all relationships. If you have lived in this world long enough you know these markers on the journey of life that will come or have come and they shape us, grip us, sometimes shake us to the core. For no matter who we are there is no simple path through life that does not involve walking some time in the winter periods waiting for new colour, new hope to emerge.

Psalm 31, the psalm assigned for this day, phrases it this way: "Have mercy on me, O LORD, for I am in trouble; my eye is consumed with sorrow.... For my life is wasted with grief, and my years with sighing; my strength fails me because of affliction, and my bones are consumed. I have become a reproach to all my enemies and even to my neighbours, a dismay to those of my acquaintance; when they see me in the street they avoid me. I am forgotten like a corpse, out of mind; I am as useless as a broken pot."

The psalmist is describing what we too have seen and known. What we observe on the news of war zones, school shootings, refugees, residential schools, at every hospital in the lower mainland, but also what we observe in our own homes, in the lives of our loved ones, and if we are honest, within our own selves.

But tragedy can also invite us to think more deeply about what is at the very heart and the very core of life. It can quickly slash away all of the busyness and immaterial parts to our daily living and bring us to the centre, the really real if you will, the truth of life.

You see that is why we are here today. We are here at church on this Palm Sunday because the central story of our faith connects so much with our own central story. For on this day, maybe even more so than any other, the intersection of our pilgrimage through life and Christ's is at its peak. Today of all days, we link our lives with Jesus', our journey with his, our pain with his, our tragedy with his, our struggles, worries, doubts, fears, grief with his own. For if we are only here to listen to an age old tale of another tragedy that took place in our world, well there would be no point in gathering today. If Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem to a throng of cheering people has no connection to our own joyous celebrations and happiness and acceptance in society then we miss the point. This arrival connects with our great moments and wondrous times. The cakes, the smiles for the cameras, the graduation, the wedding day, the anniversaries. But most of us know that life is not only about joy-filled, summer sunshine afternoons. There is a balance and a range. And so we know the dark clouds will soon arrive for Jesus, dark clouds where all seem to suddenly reject him: his followers, the religious leaders, the Romans, even God seems to have abandoned him. As the crowds shout Crucify Him, they have succeeded in turning joy into hate, celebration into condemnation... condemnation even unto death.

The ultimate highs led to ultimate lows. Most of us have faced this same journey one way or another. Not in exactly the same way or in the same circumstances but all of us have faced betrayal, or rejection, or tragedy, or the depths of grief. Palm Sunday is a reminder of Christ's connection, God's connection to all that we face when we have lived in this world long enough.

There is a figure in this story that few of us usually consider on this day: Barabbas. If you remember, he was the criminal set free by Pilate when the crowd shouted out his name. What was this Barabbas like? What was his response to being set free in exchange for Jesus? What did he do once let out of the prison? Did he stand by and watch the

crucifixion of Jesus, glad that it was not him? Was he transformed into a new person? Did he recognize a new chapter in God's connection with the human race was about to be unfurled? Did he hear Jesus' words of forgiveness, did he know the forgiveness of God and the forgiveness of his own self as he lived the rest of his days? Well we do not know the answer to these questions. But they are similar to the questions we might ask ourselves. What do we do with the depth of sorrow and pain we face in our lives? What do we do with the hurts, the worries, the doubts, the fears that can wake us in the middle of the night? What does the horrible story of the crucifixion say to us in our own dark nights?

The story of Palm Sunday is the journey from joy to sadness, from health to sickness, from calm to confusion, from celebration to anger, from cheering to violence, from trust to blame. It is the journey that takes place every day in this world and many times in our lives. But it is also the ultimate story that reminds us that God is with us no matter what. We will never be forgotten or ignored or disconnected from God's grace, love and hope. Never. I don't know if Barabbas or Pilate ever heard this message but I do know that there was a soldier, a centurion, who suddenly knew the depth of God's connection to his own soul as he said "Truly this man was God's son." A creed we continue to uphold and God-willing live out as the Church of today.

Just recently I was in Ireland to renew and make some connections and take some study leave. Part of that time was to visit a place called Glendalough. It is an ancient site of Christian community, centred around one Saint Kevin. There is much that I could tell you about the place but mostly I want to tell you about the many Celtic Crosses that are found there. A Celtic Cross has the traditional vertical and horizontal cross-pieces but added to that is a circle at the centre, at the heart of the cross. A circle represents God: having no beginning and no end. It represents the circle of life, the tragedy along with the celebration. It represents us and our link to God's grace and compassion. It represents the circle of faith. It represents the eternal love of God. It represents resurrection. It represents us and our connection to Jesus.

Today we gather to acknowledge the centrality of the story of waving palm branches to a cross of crucifixion. We acknowledge that it is a story not only of historical significance but a significance to how we walk in this world seeking the coming of a spring when often all we can see is winter. At the end of the passion reading it seems as if the winter wins out but for those of us who have peeked ahead we know that this circle of God's love will never end, that all the tragedies of this life do not have the last say, that darkness does not win out, that joyous hosannas that began our day today are not drowned out forever, they will be heard again. May we know this for our own journey as we walk in this world; that we might imagine and know the coming colours of spring even in the darkest winter of our soul. And may we discover it again this week as we walk throughout Holy Week.