

A reflection for Palm Sunday

Traditionally, we don't have a sermon on Palm Sunday but, instead, keep a period of silence after the Passion.

I won't be preaching this during our 9:15 Eucharist, but I thought a written reflection might be appropriate, in these challenging times.

Today, Palm Sunday, marks the beginning of Holy Week. Our worship begins with the commemoration of the Lord's entry into Jerusalem, and we remember the joyful welcome Jesus received from the crowds as he entered the city and was proclaimed as the Son of David – a title for the Messiah, the long-awaited, righteous, King of Israel.

We'd normally begin our worship by processing from our lych gates – or, perhaps, from our village greens – to our church, waving our palm crosses and singing All Glory Laud and Honour (probably out of tune, and, certainly, out of sync with the organist, and those who remained in church to sing). Perhaps you normally *enjoy* the procession, or perhaps you find it a little embarrassing and awkward? I expect *today*, though, many of us will miss those processions. Perhaps we'll look back and remember the processions of previous years. Perhaps we'll resolve that, next year, we'll find a donkey and have a big procession, right through our villages. Perhaps we'll resolve that, next year, we won't feel embarrassed and awkward, but will proudly proclaim our faith in Jesus our King.

In Holy Week, we walk with Jesus the way of the cross. It's normally a week where we experience the full gamut – or range – or emotions. We – possibly – share the excitement of the crowd on Palm Sunday, but then the mood quickly changes with the Passion Reading, and the stark reminder that this is a journey to the cross. Many of you, I'm sure, will have wept, in the past, on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, as you, perhaps, had your feet washed ... as you received Communion, then watched the stripping of the altar and sanctuary. You'll, perhaps, have participated in a Watch, seeking to do for our Lord what his first disciples could not – to stay awake, to watch and wait with him, in the garden. You'll have spent time, on Good Friday, in front of the cross, perhaps listening to a series of reflections, interspersed with silence and with hymns. You'll have experienced the emptiness of Holy Saturday ... and then, on Easter Day, the joy of the resurrection bubbling up inside you.

Perhaps, like me, you can look back on many Holy Weeks, and recall the roller-coaster of emotions?

My earliest memory of Holy Week is of sitting with my mum, at home, on Good Friday, when I was a young child, listening to a record of The Old Rugged Cross. I also remember serving in the Sanctuary one Maundy Thursday, the year after I lost my mum, with tears rolling down my cheeks ... but I also remember, on Easter Day that year, experiencing for the first time the joy of the resurrection.

I have happy memories of children's workshops I helped deliver. For several years, I was in charge of creating, with the children, an Easter Garden.

I remember observing the Triduum at Ripon College Cuddesdon in 2016 – my first experience of venerating the cross. And I remember Holy Weeks and Easter in my Curacy parish ... a Good Friday procession through the streets, with a large cross ... getting up before dawn on Easter morning to watch the sun rise over the North Sea ... celebrating the resurrection of our Lord with champagne. And, in all these memories, I remember the people I was with as I journeyed through Holy Week. People who helped me to develop my faith. People who inspired me to become a Reader, or lay minister. People who helped me to discern a call to ordination. Holy Week was never a journey I trod alone. And part of what made Holy Week special was the people with whom I shared that journey.

Perhaps you, too, find that people feature strongly in your memories of Holy Week?

Our faith is rarely something we celebrate in isolation. The Book of Genesis tells us that it is not good for humankind to be alone. We are created for relationship – with God and with each other. Jesus himself, when he embarked upon his public ministry, called a group of people to accompany him on his journey.

But now, this Holy Week, we must navigate strange waters. We won't be able to gather in our churches, with our brothers and sisters in Christ, to walk through Holy Week together. Many will walk through Holy Week seemingly on their own. Others might be the only Christian in their household. I have a feeling Holy Week will be difficult for many of us. But I hope that our faith will be the anchor which holds us steady and keeps us afloat.

As I was writing this, on Saturday afternoon, I took a break for my 'daily exercise' dog walk. In the fields below St Mary's Church, I saw several butterflies – red admirals, I think – and I was transported back to the last public Eucharist I presided at before 'lockdown' began, on Sunday 15th March, at All Saints. As I went to set up the altar for Communion, after the peace, I spotted a butterfly perched upon the altar. I placed the chalice, ciborium and paten, containing the bread and wine, very carefully on the

altar, so as not to disturb the butterfly; and it remained on the altar until I inadvertently disturbed it, at the point in the Eucharistic Prayer where the priest takes first the bread, and then the wine, in their hands and elevates it. At that moment, the butterfly took off, and flew over the heads of the congregation, before settling elsewhere in the church.

Butterflies have long been used as a symbol of the resurrection, and new life. They are – for many – a vivid reminder of the risen Christ, who emerges from the tomb with a body that is both the same and, yet, different – a risen body. A body which signifies new, resurrection, life; and a body which, forty days after Easter, ascends into the heavens, like a butterfly taking flight.

For me, the butterfly which several of us saw in All Saints, a day or so before 'lockdown' began, and the butterflies I saw on my walk, remind me of the Christian hope – the “sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life,”¹ - the hope which is “a sure and steady anchor of the soul.”²

This Holy Week, we will navigate through territory that is both unknown and yet, also, strangely familiar. I believe that, in our isolation, we will gain a deeper experience of the bewilderment, fear and grief of Jesus' first disciples. I also believe that the Lord, who – on the night before he died – promised his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit, and comforted them with the words, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you,”³ I believe that Jesus will reach out to us in new ways this Holy Week and Easter, to comfort us, to assure us of his presence, and to set our hearts on fire with love for him.

May you have a blessed Holy Week, as you take up your cross and journey with Christ through the valley of the shadow of death ... and, in the bleakest, darkest hours, may you remember the sure and certain hope that death is not the end ... that our journey with Christ continues beyond Good Friday and the cross.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

Amen

¹ From the prayer of Committal, at a funeral service

² Hebrews 6:19

³ John 14.18