

SERMON PALM SUNDAY 2018

I read a story recently about a little boy who was sick one Sunday and couldn't go to church, so he stayed at home with his mother. His father came back carrying a palm branch and the little boy asked what that was for. His father explained the story about Jesus coming riding in on a donkey. The boy was upset and exclaimed that it wasn't fair that Jesus comes the one Sunday he was not at church to see him.

Oh, the wonderful simplicity and expectation of the young! How wonderful to think we might just come to church and meet Jesus! What expectations might we have, I wonder?

Last Tuesday morning, 6 of us sat around a table in a hall at Parramatta mission, studying the readings for this Sunday. We often begin by talking about what has been going on in the world around us. This day someone spoke about a Year 9 student who had committed suicide the previous day as a result of bullying. Some mentioned the ASEAN meetings that had been held in Sydney and the background of human rights issues, especially for the Rohingya. We talked about the bush fires at Tathra and the devastating loss of homes, livelihoods and environment, as in the fires in Victoria and the floods in Queensland. Then we read the passage from Isaiah 50 which starts: "The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue and to know the word to sustain the weary." We pondered how people today understand the words "Sovereign Lord", and how, indeed, it has been difficult for many people to talk about God's "Kingdom". Much depends on one's age, background culture and so on. I remember a few occasions as a child being very excited over royal events, not least the Queen's coronation which I dimly remember with all the procession, the pageantry and so on. But for many people, all that makes no connection. However, for young people, the young royals do make an impression. That is not about the pageantry stuff but about William and Kate, and Harry and now Megan adding their combined weight to the challenges for young people about mental health. Then there is Harry and the Invictus Games. Here are role models that are based on actions more than privilege.

There is a very understandable suspicion of authority these days which is not a bad thing, though at the same time we know how some people who feel marginalised can become angry or drop out. Just this last week there was something on the news about a new kind of school for Years 10-12 where students and teachers use first names, where students can wear what they want, where their hairstyles are not monitored and where the authority structures are different. At the same time, someone I know in education works in primary schools where children have very problematical behaviours because they have never been given any boundaries or taught respect at home.

So how do we, as Christians, relate to the authority that we state that God has? What do we mean when we speak of the Lordship of Christ? Do we, like that little boy I mentioned at the beginning, expect to catch sight of this Sovereign Lord when we come to church? Sunday by Sunday we gather and participate in worship which focusses us on the divine, eternal, life-giving nature of God; which offers a place where we can come and confess our brokenness and the broken nature of the world before God in whom we find forgiveness and are offered the opportunity to begin again. Our worship reminds us of the vertical dimension. What about the horizontal, and our connections to the societies, the country, the world we are part of? Of course our faith journey is not only fuelled by what happens on Sundays, because we also believe and know that God is everywhere and certainly not limited within what used to be called "the house of God". God is there, in all those things we also mentioned earlier, even if it may seem hard to find God amid violence and destruction. We learn and grow in faith through so many things. But what does calling Jesus "Lord" mean day by day?

I think Palm Sunday is an important story and something of a metaphor, particularly in the way Mark tells it. We know it well. Jesus, approaching Jerusalem from the east, sends two of his disciples to collect a colt and gives them instructions about this. It seems that this is a planned event. They bring the colt, put their cloaks on it and Jesus sits on it. As he rides into Jerusalem people spread their cloaks on the road, along with branches (it is only John who specifies palms) they have cut in the fields. People go ahead and follow shouting out their hosannas, crying out "Blessed

is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Jesus goes to the Temple, looks around at everything and then leaves to go back to Bethany with his disciples because it was late.

Jesus has made a point in this dramatic episode. We often talk about the expectations of the crowd and of how the hosannas turn to cries of "Crucify" by the end of the week, but it could well be that this was not just about the misunderstanding and fickle nature of crowds. Have you ever thought about this as a protest demonstration? According to some scholars and historians, at the same time, Pilate was also making his entry to Jerusalem through the bigger west gate, riding his horse and accompanied by his soldiers. He came to Jerusalem to be there for the Passover Festival, as he customarily did. Here there would have been crowds waving him on too. Another fact is that not many years before, there had been another big demonstration by people opposed to Roman rule. It had been cruelly suppressed and 2,000 crucified. This was no small thing Jesus was doing. Even going to the Temple was risky because there was a tall watchtower from which the goings-on all around were monitored by the soldiers. His entrance would have been noted.

It was a courageous, even foolish act of Jesus'. What might he have been demonstrating against? He is very powerfully showing people that there is another authority from that of the Roman empire. There is the kingdom of God which is not about force and control by military might but is about humility and the kinds of life-giving actions in which he has been involved. He knew he was not going to win the battle that lay ahead of him but he would, in the days ahead, make more demonstrations of the Kingdom way and of whose authority he lived by. He would be mocked and scourged, beaten and nailed to a cross, and through him the war would be won, to use the terminology of conflict.

As we sit here, there are bus-loads of school students in the US making their way to Washington to demonstrate against gun violence. "No more" they protest. I hope it is a massive success that will create an irresistible momentum for change. Yet we all

know that change doesn't just happen like that. Often the important time is what happens next, when the demonstrators have dispersed. Last week the parents of Scott and Thomas Kelly were speaking at a meeting, again. Their son Scott killed himself last year because of cyber bullying, two years after his brother Thomas was killed in a one-punch drunken hit. They were the parents' only two children. Now the parents keep the pressure on to maintain awareness of these issues, as do other parents similarly affected. In a sense, the demonstration is the easy bit. If you have ever been on a protest march, and I have been on a few, you will know the camaraderie and energy that builds up. Even things like the Anzac Day parades that we will be witnessing again soon are probably not much more important than the conversations that go on afterwards in the RSL clubs all around the country. One minister friend as commenting that some ministers he knew would not go into the clubs because of alcohol and so on. But he knew the power of going there wearing his dog-collar and he knew the pastoral need he found on that emotional day.

Jesus' procession into Jerusalem made a very important statement. He then sustained his lonely actions through the week we call Holy, by the grace and power of God's authority on which he solely depended. What happened after this and after the events of Easter for the disciples, would shape the future. They learned, and went on learning about the nature of God's authority, and what the kingdom of God meant in their daily lives. It is no less so for us as we set out, today, into Holy Week together. What kind of king are we looking for to whom we may turn to lead us forward? If it is a king who will guarantee our security – a word that is much used today – or a king who will offer us a share of prestige, control or affluence, then we are following the wrong king. Lent has been preparing us for what we are going to find through this coming week. Meantime, today, Jesus goes riding on into the seat of religious and political power and authority and we can go too, if we have our eyes open to see and our ears to hear what we are being shown. The supposed triumph of this day will not become clear until later on and it will depend then on the choice that all of us make about whose authority will guide us.