

Palm Sunday 2021 (28.03.2021)

Philippians 2: 5 – 11; John 12: 12 – 16

Tuesday of this last week was a Day of National Reflection to mark a whole year since the first coronavirus lockdown began. In fact the Archbishops of Canterbury and York had effectively closed down the Church of England to public worship a week earlier. This time last year I was streaming services across the internet from the Rectory living room. We spent Sunday mornings rearranging the furniture to try and make it look something like a chapel; and if you thought we were successful, you might have thought differently if you could have seen all the furniture piled up behind the camera in front of the fireplace!

It's worth, though, just before we think a bit about Palm Sunday, to pause and reflect on the impact lockdown has had on the Priory: on the ways our shared life has been diminished; and the ways in

which, in some respects, it's actually been enriched. As we move into a post-pandemic world, we need to be having as many conversations as possible, in as many different places as possible, about what it's important to resume, what new things we want to hang on to, and which things sensitively consigning to history.

Over the last year, all the sermon slots have been chalk and talk. There haven't been interactive presentations with visual aids. When the Revd Christine Strand, the Priory's Associate Minister, first came to us as a Curate, she took a Palm Sunday Family Service, not knowing that I'd done exactly the same thing the previous year. You get one of the oak thrones out of the sanctuary, you get out the Christmas dressing up box, and then you get two young volunteers. You dress one youngster in the robes of one of the three wise men, a velvet cloak and a crown, and you sit them on the throne. Then you put the other in a rough shift that a shepherd would wear at the nativity service.

And then you ask the assembled Beavers and Brownies which one is a king; and of course they call out that it's the one sitting on the throne; and you affirm that that's what it might seem like to *us*, but that Jesus demonstrated that his type of kingship is the exact opposite by riding into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday on a humble donkey.

It makes the point powerfully, even if actually it doesn't bear much analysis, because we don't live in an age of mediaeval absolute monarchs. To eschew top-down autocratic leadership isn't all that counter-cultural. There are plenty of management gurus out there who will say that leadership is exercised most effectively by collaboration and delegation. And the message of Palm Sunday is radically counter-cultural to any human society or organisation. Jesus didn't ride into Jerusalem on a donkey in order to achieve *anything* effectively. He wasn't adopting an alternative technique of effectiveness – because he wasn't trying to achieve anything. He was simply

foreshadowing how God's glory is most supremely revealed in humility. He was identifying with the humble and the meek, the poor, the powerless and the marginalised; and by identifying with them he was empowering them.

But the reading from Philippians takes it even further. In the version of the Bible we use at the Priory – the New Revised Standard Version – the words we've heard proclaimed this morning are indented in the text. In some Bibles they're even put in inverted commas. That's because scholars reckon that these words are not St. Paul's words. Rather he is quoting a hymn that was already a stalwart of early Christian worship. It contains the idea that Jesus didn't just adopt humility, but he completely emptied himself when he allowed himself even to die for us.

This isn't just counter-cultural. It's counter-intuitive. It makes no sense at all. The mystery we're contemplating today cannot be explained or

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rationalised. There's no proposition that can make it all logically coherent. It is a mystery. It's the stuff of poetry rather than prose. And therefore can most affectively be expressed in poetry. This is W. H. Vanstone's "Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense."

1. Morning glory, starlit sky,
soaring music, scholar's truth,
flight of swallows, autumn leaves,
memory's treasure, grace of youth:

2. Open are the gifts of God,
gifts of love to mind and sense;
hidden is love's agony,
love's endeavour, love's expense.

3. Love that gives, gives ever more,
gives with zeal, with eager hands,
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
ventures all its all expends.

4. Drained is love in making full,
bound in setting others free,
poor in making many rich,
weak in giving power to be.

5. Therefore he who shows us God
helpless hangs upon the tree;
and the nails and crown of thorns
tell of what God's love must be.

6. Here is God: no monarch he,
throned in easy state to reign;
here is God, whose arms of love
aching, spent, the world sustain.

Amen.