

## Sermon 20210328 Palm/Passion Sunday

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

I have to confess that while I love the glory of the Palm procession, I don't look forward to the part that comes afterward. We call the story of Jesus' betrayal and death the 'Passion' from the Latin word 'passio' which means to suffer.

Crucifixion was a horribly cruel death. It could take several days for the person to die. It was also humiliating. Despite all the paintings and statues of Jesus wearing a loincloth, victims were generally stripped naked and on display for anyone to see. Rome deliberately used crucifixion as an instrument of terror to keep people in line. If a slave killed their master, not only was that slave crucified but every slave in the household. After the failed rebellion of Spartacus 6,000 were crucified.

Atrocities seem to be part of our human history. Auschwitz, Hiroshima, residential schools, mass killings in Toronto and just recently in Atlanta and Colorado. They are all events that test our faith and prompts the question, "Why doesn't God do something to stop them?"

We began Lent with the story of the flood and the death of all human beings and animals except for those Noah saved in the ark. Roberta said,

"The story of the flood is a disturbing story of destruction and judgement and we should not ignore that message. But it's also the story of a God who cares deeply about life and wants good for all the creatures of this world. A God who is, despite what we might think of this method, willing to try to restore and redeem what's been broken.

.....[Then] Having deployed violence to end violence, God looks at the results and decides to never do it again. .... And God not only decides never to do it again, the story says God then creates a covenant with all of creation that binds God's own self against using this way of dealing with sin again, no matter what happens in the world. No matter what happens going forward, the rainbow is a promise that God will never try to deal with sin and violence by using violence."

So as Jesus is arrested, tried and put to death, using violence to change the course of events is not an option God will take. This story of the Passion is a moving example of meeting evil and violence in an unexpected way.

If we were confronted by a crowd bearing swords and clubs, I expect we'd flee or fight back. One of Jesus' followers does fight back and cuts off the ear of the high priest's slave. But Jesus renounces violence. He stands firm and restores the slave's ear.

When we are accused of something we have not done, we do everything in our power to bring the truth to light. The chief priests, enraged by Jesus, bring many accusations against him to Pilate. But Jesus, who we know is able to outwit any who engage in a verbal contest against him refuses to be drawn into this hostility. He waits with dignity giving both the chief priests and Pilate a chance to do the right thing.

When people are mocked and beaten they resist, cry, cower and/or plead. But Jesus quietly goes where the soldiers lead him. Even on the cross when others would curse those who strung them up Jesus utters not a word against those who hurt him. His only words are the question, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."

In the face of all that is going wrong in the world we too can wonder, "Where is God?"

God is here but refuses to use force. God is in the quiet urging "Be kind, be calm, be safe". God is in the persistence of front-line workers to keep hospitals and grocery stores open. God is in the voices that ask us to renounce bullying, racism and other forms of oppression.

God's way is a way of non-violence that says 'no' to all forms of violence against God's human and non-human world.

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In our second reading we heard Paul encourage the Philippians to live a new way "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus".

Now that's a scary thought if it brings up images of us dying on a cross. But that is not what Paul is saying. Paul says that Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient..." Obedient to God's way. God loves the whole world and wants us to follow in a way that brings life for all.

Richard Spaulding, former chaplain of Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts cautions us from reading this as an invitation for each of us, individually, to take up our cross and follow Jesus. He reminds us that Paul is writing to a deeply faithful community with a broad collection of gifts. Paul urges them to be joined by the same mind, the same purpose as Jesus. God's purpose.

So rather than ask what can each of us do, Paul is urging us to ask "What does our community need to do together to follow Jesus?"

When we turn from looking at this text as only a comment on Jesus' death and remember Jesus' life, we see that Jesus mind and purpose was to bring God's kingdom into the here and now. To help the widow and the orphan, to heal the sick and feed the hungry.

Along with many other things, COVID-19 struck down the sandwich ministry here at St. Anne's. Sharmilla and Roberta have been having conversations with various groups to understand what other needs are out there. What ministry is God calling us to now?

It can feel like an overwhelming question. Our call rarely comes with verbalized instructions like: "Have a baby." "Go to Ninevah", "Free my people from slavery in Egypt".

I think God trusts us to work it out and choose from the many things that need doing.

The good news is that we're Anglican. We don't have to figure this out just on our own. We have people in the Diocese that look for ways to help parishes understand and respond to God's call.

This Lent the Diocese has been offering a taste of a program developed by Eric Law of the Kaleidoscope Institute..

Some of you who have been at St. Anne's for many years will remember the Kaleidoscope program. We learned a lot about appreciating and knitting together the strengths of our diverse backgrounds from Eric.

This new program helps parishes appreciate their strengths and resources and develop their skill sets for engaging the neighbourhoods in which they have been planted.

Every Wednesday we have been hearing some wonderful stories of congregations that have learned to join together in the same mind as Christ to offer service to the communities around them.

One story was about a church struggling as the neighbourhood around them was deteriorating and membership declined. Not wanting to give up, members of the congregation learned to intentionally engage and listen to the people in the community around the church.

They noticed that many said they had a tough time getting fresh, local food. This church had a large parking lot so they decided to organize a weekly public market. It was a huge success. It cost them very little money and has expanded way beyond their original vision. Church membership has grown as people value what they do and the neighbourhood is being revitalized.

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In the stories we have heard these past five weeks, each of the congregations have resolutely made a decision to be of the same mind as Christ, to work in God's mission to those with needs. They learned new skill to build relationships. Then they looked outwards to the needs around them, gathered resources from inside and outside their congregations and together began something quite amazing.

When bills pile up they are both worrisome and distracting. But God calls us not to be distracted. To be of the same mind as Christ, we are to empty ourselves of worries for this community and trust that God's way will lead us.

Our parish has a wonderful assembly of faithful, good and talented people. Together we can identify the needs around us. Together we can work with God to bring greater justice into our neighbourhood. Together we can trust that God will lead us into new life that is more than we can ask or imagine.

AMEN