

Palm Sunday 9 April 2017

[Isaiah 50: 4-9; Psalm 31: 9-16; Philippians 2: 5-11; The Reading Of The Passion Of Our Lord According To St Matthew](#) Liturgy of the Passion Vanderbilt

[Liturgy of the Passion A April 9 2017](#) Textweek

We celebrate "Palm Sunday" today, and those who walked all the way from Gino's carrying palm branches might well feel cheated as there was no mention of them whatsoever in the dramatic reading of the Gospel according to Matthew.

Palm Sunday is known for a celebration of the 'Triumphal entry into Jerusalem' by Jesus; and yet the lectionary reading today begins with Judas; maybe we too should feel somewhat betrayed!

Well we'll start by correcting the omission; here's Matthews Gospel from chapter 21:

21 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." ⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵ "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." ⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" ¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹ The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

That second gospel reading for the day goes some way toward correcting the omission, but if you listen closely you will have discovered another omission; Matthew does not mention 'palm branches' at all. In fact the only mention of palm branches in all four gospels is to be found in John:

"So they took branches of **palm** trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— the King of Israel!" [John 12:13]

The palm is a significant tree in the Middle East and also has some significance in other biblical narratives; here is one reading from Leviticus:

³⁹ Now, the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall keep the festival of the Lord, lasting seven days; a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day. ⁴⁰ On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. ⁴¹ You shall keep it as a festival to the Lord seven days in the year; you shall keep it in the seventh month as a statute forever throughout your generations." [Leviticus 23:39-41]

And that same significance is echoed in the only other mention of palm trees in the New Testament, from the book of Revelation:

"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with **palm** branches in their hands." [Revelation 7:9]

By looking at the inclusion of Palm trees in the lectionary we can see that the gospels are crafted texts seeking to illuminate significant wisdom, rather than documentary stories about the life and person of Jesus; they actually seek convey what Jesus himself sought to reveal.

And perhaps we have briefly glimpsed that, if we consider the context of the initial Hebraic audience: they would have been familiar with the palm motif; and from Leviticus would associate this motif with the start of a seven day festival that has significance as "a statute forever throughout your generations"; and it continues to hold a significance for us today.

We can also see from the text in Revelations that the motif is again used to place us before the "the throne and before the Lamb"; and so we stand today in two very different worlds, the place of worldly celebration, and at the same time in the dimension of the Divine, in the very real presence of the Divine.

We stand today at the beginning of a week in which we shall prepare for and encounter Easter, and that gives us an opportunity in the week ahead to seek ourselves in both dimensions, the ordinary reality of the world around us and at the same time in the extra-ordinary reality which finds us in God's presence.

The other two readings this morning also provide us with signposts for the week ahead, from Isaiah we hear:

"The Lord GOD has opened my ear"
"I did not turn backward"
"therefore I have set my face like flint"

So in the week ahead, we might mirror Isaiah, and be aware of the word of God that we hear, and yet so often do not listen too; we might look forward rather than dwelling on all that is behind us, and seek to discover to what we have set our faces toward.

We live in a culture that is all too often backwards looking, we have Royal Commissions looking toward historical failures, we have Churches looking back to old and out-dates traditions that are no longer relevant, Donald Trump seeking to take America back to past greatness, the UK entering a past age of 'Splendid Isolation' and here in Australia we are planning to open the world's largest coal-mine as if the age of steam were just beginning.

"The Lord GOD has opened my ear"
"I did not turn backward"
"therefore I have set my face like flint"

From the second reading we might see the signpost that says "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus"; and the writer clearly encourages us on the path toward 'exultation'; the path into Easter is described as a path that takes us toward a dimension of higher delight.

It is helpful to see these as signposts on the path of our own life and our own journey, both as individuals and together as humanity moving toward a higher evolution of enlightenment.

Easter is not a spectator sport, except perhaps for the first century Romans, the texts do not document a story for us to listen to and comment on; rather they illuminate our own life journey; and if we seek to walk with Christ, to follow Christ, then Easter is our narrative.

I've mentioned before that when on a retreat preparing to test my vocation to the priesthood I read a book by Abbot Columba Marmion who made his solemn profession as a monk in 1891 and then in 1909 was elected Abbot.

What I read described my own fear in becoming a priest; Columba Marmion was afraid of becoming a signpost for others and going nowhere himself; and perhaps that helps to underline for us all that we do need signposts, they point us in a direction so that we can continue the journey.

The week ahead is filled with the signposts of Christ, we are not reading his journey, rather we are being pointed toward 'Resurrection'; and that will take each and all of us beyond where we are now.

"The Lord GOD has opened my ear"
"I did not turn backward"
"therefore I have set my face like flint"
"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus"

May we each and look forward toward Easter with an anticipation that we will be open to the crucifixion of all that needs to die within ourselves so that we might come forth from the Tomb and know the reality of our Divine birth.

Peter Humphris

Note:

“The main contribution of Marmion to modern spirituality is that he opened the door to everyone and anyone. He said God does not limit Himself to the holiest of holy people but [comes] to everybody and that sinners are capable of reaching great heights as well as anyone else.”