

PALM SUNDAY

Nicky Ing - 4th April 2004

Isaiah 50: 4-9a; Psalm 31: 9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 23: 1-49

Holy Week which begins today, is really an opportunity for us to learn to be with, and to watch, Jesus Christ..... to listen, and watch...not to do anything, but just to be there....it is Jesus who is the master of his passion and His resurrection...He initiates it; he sends the disciples to fetch the colt. He knows that the triumphant entry into Jerusalem is the culmination of his own destiny...he knows too that Jerusalem means for him, pain, and death.....He enters the city as Royalty...the colt that he rides is 'unridden'in other words, it has been specially set aside for sacred use, and it signifies humility, not worldly power.....the palms spread across the road are seen as a triumphal carpet, welcoming a king...How wonderful it was for the disciples to enter Jerusalem with their King! They made such a noise that the religious people, the Pharisees, asked Jesus to quieten them down, but Jesus replies 'if these people are silent, the stones will cry out!'a crowd seems to develop a heartbeat of its own, somehow...and catches people up into a frenzy of excitement....they believed Jesus was the person God would send who would lead them into a new life, free from the oppressive Roman power they were living under....so they welcomed him as they waved their palm branches wildly at the side of the road...believing that he would deliver them, and they would follow him. But the Old Testament reading, one of the four 'Suffering Servant Songs' in Isaiah and the Psalm, and the Philippians reading too, all point to the suffering, the pain, the sorrow, and the self-emptying of Christ, who gave himself up for us all.

What did the disciples want to see in Jesus? And what did the people and the disciples see in Jesus that would in a few days, make them desert him, betray him, bring him to trial before Pilate, beat him half to death, force him to carry the cross, and then kill him in a brutally long execution? The mood of this crowd changes so rapidly to one of cruelty and violence. Whether or not we have had an opportunity, or could even bear to watch Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*... To listen to the Gospel readings today, is to find ourselves caught up in a brutal story. Something that struck me strongly was the last verse we read: '*But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.*' Perhaps it is the distance that is the problem for us...we are so used to looking at violence from a distance. We see it daily on our TVs and in our newspapers...and we resist it because it is not comfortable for us to watch it, or even get close to it. Perhaps this Holy Week we might be so busy with Easter preparations that we won't even be in church to keep watch as the drama of our redemption unfolds in the liturgy....or is it because we find it just too painful, watching Christ's passion??? But our faith invites us to come closer,

to try and imagine the mystery of a God whose love is so great that he shares the very worst that can happen to us in order to bring us to the best that can be.

On this Passion Sunday, we see, if we look and listen carefully, our own true human identity. We see some of the many ways in which people can use their power to belittle, to humiliate, to provoke, to plot and even to destroy one another...if we are honest, we can see ourselves as we so often really are. This is a difficult day. It should be. We are asked to reflect on our own human condition...what **we** are capable of, both good and bad. We too can betray another for the sake of our own safety and run away when trouble comes...we don't really like to talk about these things but in fact we do share them with each other as fallible human beings.

One of the things we tend to do is to set conditions for what we expect of other people. This was very true of the friends of Jesus, who had their own ideas of how Jesus was to meet their expectations. When he did not comply with those expectations, one friend, Judas, betrayed him, another, Peter, denied him, and the others all ran away from him. As we follow the readings this week, we discover that God sets **no** conditions on his desire for us... The day of Resurrection ...Easter...will show us once again that eternal life is possible for **everybody**...in spite of our failures, and our sins...in spite of what was done to God's Son...and even in spite of all our so-called '**Conditions**', through which we often want our religion on our own terms. We are reminded through all this of God's love, a love which sets no limits...and that **it is impossible to fall beyond the mercy of God** (even the penitent thief on the Cross next to Jesus discovered that)... This is God's amazing gift to us...that whilst we do need to reflect on our own 'humanness', God is looking instead at the '**heaven potential**' that is within each one of us. This day and this week are **not** about us, but about God's incredible love for us...his longing to be in relationship with us, as we are, and as he created us to be...and what lengths he is willing to go through to enable that to happen...Death on a Cross, for me...for you. This week, a question for us to think about....Is there something in me that needs to die, that He may take it and glorify it ...for me to grow more in Christ's image?

Last week I spent a few days in the Berg with my cousin and her husband...and as I looked at the mountains and their ripples and shadows I thought about how much they can reflect the changes in our lives...when the sun is at its height, the shadows and valleys are less noticeable...and at early morning and late afternoon there are different colours, green changing to brown as the sun moves on...there are hills and valleys like that in our lives, joy and sorrow, pain and beauty and they all melt into one another...we need the dark places too, the shadow places, if we are to grow and change. There is struggle and joy...and how we can experience that as we move forward into this

Holy Week, with all its contrasts and pain, culminating in the wonder of Easter.

In one of the earliest forms of Christian prayer, Paul's letter to the Philippians today speaks of Jesus who: *'Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death....even death on a cross... Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'* (Phil. 2:9-11).

Jesus set us the supreme example of servanthood.

So let us enter this week in **humility**, seeing ourselves in the frailty of the people reflected in the Gospel reading today...Pilate, Herod, the crowd who want Jesus killed, the soldiers, the thieves crucified next to Jesus....and those who watched, from a distance, because for them, like us, it was too painful to come closer. But let us enter this week in **joy** as we trust in God's power to heal and transform us. And let us be full of **gratitude**, because the hope we have depends not on ourselves, but on the love of God who holds us and whose faithfulness will never let us go.

I found these words in a publication in the St. Joseph's library this week: and they seemed appropriate for today:

**Christ came to earth to die, but really to live;
To open the gates of heaven, but really to show they were never closed;
To reconcile with God, but really to reveal God's presence;
To conquer death, but really to release life to all;
To forgive sin, but also to reflect goodness;
To redeem us, but, more importantly, to remind us.**

So let us be **watchful**, as we move through these powerful days.....and keep our eyes on Jesus...and be **aware**and be **reminded** of what was, and what still is, and what will always be given for us all. **Amen.**