

## Palm Sunday

Croeso and welcome to this reflection for the sixth Sunday of Lent, which we more commonly call Palm Sunday. It is also, of course, the beginning of the most important week of the Christian calendar, of Holy Week. And our readings for today are from the prophet Isaiah chapter 50, verses 4 to 9A. And from St. Mark's Gospel chapter 11, verses 1 to 11.

On Palm Sunday, because we recall Jesus's arrival into Jerusalem on a donkey and the way the crowds greeted him, waving palm branches, were often given in church a palm cross. Here is one I have from a previous year, which I keep right next to my desk. All that, like so much else is more difficult this year. But if you don't have a palm cross, I'd like to encourage you to find a cross of some kind, or an of image of a cross. Perhaps it's a crucifix somewhere in your home. Here's a crucifix, which I use sometimes to pray with. You might have one too. And if you haven't got an image of a cross, why don't you make a simple one for yourself? Something that can be part of your remembrances in this Holy Week, this year, something to keep with you, as we travel each day.

During this Lent, I've been reflecting on the theme of endurance. After all, we've all been in a time of social and national endurance. And I've been asking what habits of life - habits of prayer, of love, of justice, of lament - what habits will help us in a time like this, to live with faith and hope, as we hold on. My final reflection with you is about enduring to the end.

Here we have the example of Jesus, who, as Isaiah says, "set his face like a flint" to the suffering that was to be imposed on him. And he finished the task that was given to him, the salvation of the world. He chose to endure rather than to escape.

At any point in the story of this coming week, Jesus could have slipped out of Jerusalem, and headed back towards Galilee. He wasn't blind to the risks, to the fickleness of the crowd, to the meanness of the religious authorities. And he, just as we have to do, had to find courage to face the stresses and anxieties which went with his situation. But here on Palm Sunday, as Jesus rides into the city which will welcome him and then slay him, we have a story about seeing something through to the end. Not grasping at something and then thinking better of it. Not cutting it short when the going gets tough, but enduring until it is finished, or until it lets you go.

And with the example of Jesus in mind, his faithfulness to what the Father was asking of him overriding all of his sense of self interest, let me offer you just three thoughts attached to phrases from our Old Testament passage in Isaiah chapter 50.

The first one is where Isaiah says, talking about the Suffering Servant, the one who will do God's will, God's purpose. "Morning by morning the Lord God awakens my ear to listen, as those who are taught, the Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious. I did not turn backwards." This talks about the servant of God attending, daily attending, morning by morning, to what God has to say, what God and goodness ask of him, and not being rebellious or giving up on it.

So here's my first point for you. That constancy is a hugely important part of our life, of our living well, of our living in faith. Constancy, devotion, loyalty, stickability: they're all virtues which we see in the God who we worship. Let me give you an example. We've been making a lot of appointments of Vicars during this Lent in the diocese. And we're welcoming into the diocese some new clergy, some who are coming to join us in our work here. And in making of those appointments, we do it by application, and interview. We get to know somebody's history, their ministerial experience. And one of the questions which always crops up is whether these people will stay with situations, learn from them, work through them, when the going gets tough. Ministry is very rarely plain sailing and it

needs a resilient character. So if someone has a track record of leaving posts after a very short time, it inevitably signals a red flag, for those who are charged with the recruitment. We believe that there is a very great value in staying with our responsibilities, and not as Isaiah puts it, 'turning backwards'.

I'm an enthusiastic supporter of the remarriage of divorcees in church. I believe in allowing people to make a new start: that failure is not the end. However, when the Church decided to allow such weddings to take place, I also felt with those who, sometimes out of Christian conviction about the lifelong nature of marriage, had stayed in difficult, sometimes maybe even abusive marriages, trying hard to observe their vows with constancy. The Church was certainly not undermining the devotion that they had applied to their own situation.

And we do right to hold tight to our responsibilities, morning by morning, never being rebellious, never turning backward, but with constancy holding to what is asked of us.

Secondly, if we do endure to the end, it often involves us in painful sacrifice. I had a letter this week from someone whose wife had developed dementia. He was talking about how it was to be her carer, and how going to church was no longer possible for them both. He admitted to also struggling with our online services. But he'd heard me do a service on the radio, and he wanted me to know how much it helped, as he held tight to the burdens of caring for his wife.

Isaiah goes on to say that the Suffering Servant, the one seeking to do God's will, doesn't hide his face from insults and spitting. But he set his face like a flint, and knows he shall not be put to shame. I marvel at the courage and dedication of so many who care or who maintain this spirit in the face of personal suffering, maybe not 'insults and spitting', but certainly painful sacrifices. What Isaiah is saying is that the pain is not everything. It's not the total picture. Suffering is not merely pain, for far more is achieved. There's more fruit. And take that example of the gentleman caring for his wife, just think of the dignity, the gift of dignity he is giving her in these years. And think perhaps of some of the people who've written about their time in concentration camps in World War Two, and who have become examples to us. Elie Weisel, Levi Primo, Viktor Frankl, Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, they all testified to how suffering was not the whole of their experience, that even that suffering is capable of making something better of us. So in enduring to the end, let us not be afraid of the anxiety or the pain, nor see it as the only thing that is going on in our life.

Thirdly, Isaiah repeats a phrase which should surely be our by-word, our repeated conviction. "The Lord God helps me." In facing things which are not easily fixed, things which will not end soon, which are stressful or unfair, and we wish were different. In the face of such things we will find for ourselves practical responses. We will turn to family and friends, will make sure that somewhere we find support and comfort for ourselves. But we also need the habit, day by day of reminding ourselves that it is 'the Lord God who helps us'. He doesn't abandon us. He doesn't even need to be asked for he knows, what are our cares, our troubles. He knows we need daily grace, and his grace will be sufficient for us, as it was for Jesus as He walked the pathway to the Cross, the path that was meant for him.

So he, of course, is our example in this week, our strength as we carry our own particular cross, endure our own pilgrim way, as we set our faces to deal with whatever tribulation has in store for us.

What Jesus shows us is that our pilgrim journey isn't all about grim fortitude. For all its challenges, it's a way along which he promises to travel with us. And it is a way which leads us to eternal life. For we carry our cross, to the dawning of Easter and to the Alleluias of resurrection. "The Lord God helps me."