

20 March 2016, Palm Sunday St Botolph's Isaiah 42:1-9

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of our journey with Christ through Holy week to the Cross and onto his Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Without doubt Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was dramatic! The symbolism would not have been lost on the religious leaders. The whole city was seismically shaken, rather like an earthquake. It must have seemed that Jesus had reached the pinnacle of his power.

At this very point of Jesus' popularity, with prophecies pointing towards his majesty and kingship; at this moment of adulation and celebration, when the crowds were in the palm of his hands and the religious leaders were powerless, Jesus could have brought about his own rule, if he had wanted to.

In Matthew four verse nine, the devil had said to him in the wilderness, 'All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me ...' in other words, grasp fame and glory for yourself!

No, there for all to see, Jesus rode on a donkey, a beast of burden, for a man who would come to carry the heaviest burden of all; the sins of the whole world.

In the week that lay ahead he would demonstrate servanthood rather than kingship and the need to do His Father's will rather than His own.

The reading this morning from Isaiah is the first of four passages which are called the "Servant Songs". There are four "Servant Songs" where Isaiah describes the service, suffering, and exaltation of the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah. All four songs show the Messiah to be God's meek and gentle Servant. He is the high priest, atoning for the sins of the world. Isaiah prophesies that this Servant of the Lord would rescue the world from the prison of sin. In the royal language of the ancient Near East, a servant was a "trusted envoy," a "confidential representative," or "one who is chosen."

In this first song, the Servant of the Lord is chosen by God, and God delights in Him. The Servant has the Spirit of God abiding in Him. In Matthew 3 verses sixteen to eighteen, when Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan, the Spirit of God descended upon Him, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." The clear teaching of the New Testament is that Jesus is the Servant in the Servant Song prophecies.

The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at His baptism. This is how the “upholding” of the Servant takes place: by the sustaining power of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

With this Spiritual endowment in mind, the LORD declares the success of the Servant’s mission: verse one tells us, “He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles”.

“Judgement” is a key word in the first part of our passage: recurring again in verse 3, “he shall bring forth judgment unto truth”; and in verse 4, “He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth”.

Yet the Servant comes first of all without show as verse two tells us, “He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street”. But there is also a tenderness about Jesus’ ministry, as implied in the figurative language of verse three “A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench”. His ministry will be quiet and non-aggressive. Reflecting his ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey rather than in the victorious manner expected of a royal person.

But what is the servant of the Lord saying about God with reeds and wicks? Reeds were common along the Sea of Galilee. They are hollow stemmed and quite fragile. All it would take to bruise or break them is a strong wind or a fisherman’s boat coming ashore. In marshy areas, we see some reeds standing tall... but we also find many broken down. Once a reed is broken, it can’t be fixed. Other plants can repair themselves and show fresh growth, but not reeds. Thinking about reeds I wondered what they were good for. Then I remembered that we used to use them on the mouthpieces of clarinets and saxophones. You would wet your reed, slip it into the mouthpiece and blow. If it was cracked however, it was no good – the sound would be distorted. You would throw it away.

In our text, Isaiah isn’t talking about reeds... he is talking about people. He is telling us that people can become bruised, hurt, knocked over. I wonder how many of us feel we are like a bruised reed. Life has a way of knocking us down. Society can declare us bruised and unusable and we all too easily subscribe to the false idea that we are useless. The servant of the Lord doesn’t see us that way. He binds the broken parts and heals the bruised among us. Think of the Leper who came to Jesus in Matthew eight verse two. Everyone said he was unclean, cast off and rejected. Standing a proper distance so as not to come too

close he said to Jesus, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean." Jesus reached out and touched the untouchable.

A demon-possessed man, naked and tormented by his past and his sins, came before Jesus. He was bound by the demons but Jesus spoke and released him from his bondage.

A woman caught in adultery was about to be stoned. The Jews were legally within their rights to stone her. But Jesus touched her and forgave her sins.

A woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, weakened by her sickness, came up in a crowd and touched Jesus. He turned and confronted her, not to scold her, but to touch her heart as well as her body.

These are the bruised reeds Jesus came to touch.

Thus Jesus identified with the humble, the ordinary, the poor, the sinner... This is where he demonstrated his true greatness.

He would seek His Father's approval before that of men. He would wear a crown of thorns rather than one of gold. He knew that suffering was ahead, and this came before glory!

And so as we come to Holy Week, may it mean for us a closer walk with Christ on his final journey to the cross. During this coming week, let us rediscover what lessons we need to learn, in order to be better Christians and better witnesses in the world in which we live.

In Jesus name, Amen.