**COVENANT COMMUNITY ONLINE SERVICE**

**PRESENTER: Calvin T Samuel**

**SUNDAY 5th APRIL 2020**

**PALM SUNDAY – When everything changes God does not**

1. **Welcome & Introduction**:

Good Morning. My name is Calvin Samuel and I’m Methodist minister for the towns of Rochford and Rayleigh in the County of Essex. Welcome to this covenant community online service for the Sixth Sunday in Lent, better known known as Palm Sunday. Whether you are already part of one of my congregations, another Christian fellowship, another faith, or indeed none, you are most welcome. We may be dispersed because of lockdown but we can choose to be a covenant community, despite social distancing.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week. Easter is only a week away, but what a week it is! On Sunday the crowds shouted, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ By Friday of the very same week another crowd, perhaps including some of the same people, shouted something very different: ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’

Life can change so very suddenly can’t it? Who would’ve thought that 2020 would have turned out the way it has so far? Not so long ago the corona virus was something that was happening to someone else and somewhere else, not here. And just like that everything changed. We’re having to figure out different ways to operate. When I trained for ministry, nobody prepared me to engage with my congregations entirely from a distance! How to put a service online was not one of the modules I was taught when I trained for ministry. As a former theological educator, I can assure you this is not one of the competencies we expected of student ministers. And yet here we all are. Covid-19 has changed our lives, and we’re all trying to figure out what do we do now?

Life can change so very suddenly can’t it? For some of us, a global pandemic has meant something very personal, loss of employment, or other forms of financial hardship. If you’ve been laid off from work because of Covid–19 right now you have no idea what the future holds and its scary! Holy Week is a reminder that life can change so very suddenly. But it has always been thus. The good news is that we serve a God who does not change. A God unphased by sudden change. A God who, in Christ, comes to us into the messiness of our lives, and loves us anyway. Or first hymn is a traditional one but with a contemporary twist. Praise to the Lord the Almighty.

1. **PRAISE TO THE LORD, THE ALMIGHTY**

Praise to the Lord,  
The almighty the King of creation  
O my soul praise him  
For he is your health and salvation  
Come all who hear, now to his temple draw near  
Praise him in glad adoration

Praise to the Lord,  
Above all things so wondrously reigning  
Sheltering you under his wings,  
And so gently sustaining  
Have you not seen, all that is needful been  
Sent by his gracious ordaining.

Praise to the Lord,

who will prosper your work and defend you,  
Surely his goodness and mercy

Shall daily attend you

Ponder anew what the Almighty can do,  
If with His love he befriends you.

Praise to the Lord,  
O let all that is in me adore him  
All that hath life and breath,  
Come now with praises before him  
Let the amen, sound from his people again  
Gladly forever adore him.

1. **PRAYERS**

Let us pray.

Be with us, Lord, as we offer our prayer and praise.

Grant that what we sing with our lips,  
we may believe in our hearts,  
and what we believe in our hearts,  
we may show forth in our lives.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**.

1. **SCRIPTURE**

Palm Sunday is about many things but it’s mostly about Jesus making an entrance. People had wondered for years whether Jesus was indeed the Messiah. He was undoubtedly a miracle worker and teacher, he taught with authority, he cast out evil spirits. But was he or wasn’t he the messiah?

On Palm Sunday Jesus answered those questions emphatically. And he did so by making an entrance. In fulfilment of prophecy he entered the eastern gate of the city of Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The crowd understood the significance of this act which is why they responded not only with excitement, but with the correct liturgical response: Blessed is the one who comes in the Name of the Lord!

So, let’s listen now to words from scripture. First, we hear from Psalm 118 which prophesies that the messiah will enter through the ‘gate of the Lord’ and then we hear from Matthew 21 the story of the triumphal entry of Jesus. Following our readings we move directly into our next piece of music: God I look to you.

**Psalm 118.1–2 & 19–27a & 29**

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;*

*his steadfast love endures forever!*

*Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”*

*Open to me the gates of righteousness,*

*that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.*

*This is the gate of the Lord;*

*the righteous shall enter through it.*

*I thank you that you have answered me*

*and have become my salvation.*

*The stone that the builders rejected*

*has become the chief cornerstone.*

*This is the Lord’s doing;*

*it is marvellous in our eyes.*

*This is the day that the Lord has made;*

*let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

*Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!*

*O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*

*We bless you from the house of the Lord.*

*The Lord is God, and he has given us light.*

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,*

*for his steadfast love endures forever.*

**Matthew 21.1–11**

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,*

*“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.”*

*The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.*

*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!”*

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking,*

*“Who is this?” The crowds were saying,*

*“This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”*

1. **GOD I LOOK TO YOU**

God, I look to You, I won't be overwhelmed  
Give me vision to see things like You do  
God I look to You, You're where my help comes from  
Give me wisdom, You know just what to do

And I will love You, Lord, my strength  
I will love You, Lord, my shield  
I will love You, Lord, my rock   
Forever, all my days I will love You, God

God, I look to You, I won't be overwhelmed  
Give me vision to see things like You do  
God I look to You, You're where my help comes from  
Give me wisdom, You know just what to do

I will love You, Lord, my strength  
I will love You, Lord, my shield  
I will love You, Lord, my rock

Forever all my days I will love You, God

Hallelujah, our God reigns  
Hallelujah, our God reigns  
Hallelujah, our God reigns  
Forever, all my days, Hallelujah

1. **The Sermon**

On Palm Sunday we traditionally give out palm crosses. The palm cross is a way of recognising the very nature of holy week. At its beginning people threw palm branches under Jesus’ feet, at the end people nailed him to a cross. It’s a reminder that what people say about you, or how they respond to you is not all that significant in the grand scheme of things.

We live in a world where our value can so often be determined by public opinion. If I have a million followers on Instagram or a million subscribers on YouTube, and let me say right now, I’m totally open to that possibility, then I’m significant; I matter in the world. If I’m famous, people know my name, then, somehow, I have value because in the court of public opinion, people love me. However, as we all very well know we human beings are fickle people. Public opinion can be with you today and against you tomorrow. We need a more solid base for our identity and worth, than what other people think.

It strikes me that Jesus offers insight into that more solid base. He is clear of his identity. We see something of that in Matthew 21.2–3. Go to the village ahead, untie the donkey you find and bring it to me. If anyone questions you tell them the Lord has need of it. There’s a play on words here. The Lord could be a reference to Jesus, and it could be a reference to the idea that God needs the donkey in order that Jesus might do God’s will. Either way there’s a confidence, a settled-ness in Jesus that doesn’t come from others, but from his self-awareness of who he is in God’s economy. In his case, Jesus knows he’s the Messiah and he acts accordingly. So he makes his entrance via the East Gate, owning his identity.

What I find striking is that there’s no reference to how Jesus responds to the crowd. Does Jesus lap up their adulation? Does he try to tone it down? In the version of this story in Luke 19 the Pharisees try to get Jesus to tone down the crowd. Jesus’ response is that if the crowd were silent the very stones would cry out. There is a truth deeply rooted in Jesus’s identity that will be expressed. The silence of our Matthean text about Jesus’ response to the crowd for me suggests a level of indifference. It’s not that Jesus doesn’t care what the crowd thinks, so much as he will not allow anyone other than God to define who he is. That’s the more solid base for our identity.

So, who gets to define you? So many of us in lockdown are in danger of losing our sense of worth and identity. Some of us derive a sense of self-worth from our work. Now that we can’t work, we’re less sure who we are and less sure of our value. For some of us it’s our role, whether in the family or the community, that defines us. But that’s now changed and now we question our value. Some of us our identity is wrapped up in our achievements and status. When we go into the office, or about our daily lives we’re accustomed to being treated with deference and respect. But in lockdown those achievements and status mean very little. I want to suggest to you that our situation presents us with a golden opportunity to look ourselves in the eye and to ask the question, Who am I really? And who gets to answer that question? Because, it’s not other people, and it’s not even you. Your opinion of yourself is not the determining factor because you are no more reliable than the crowd, Jesus was no more defined by this crowd who called him Son of David than he was defined by the next crowd who called him Blasphemer and False prophet. He was defined by his relationship to the Father. And so are you. In these challenging times when it feels like everything is in flux remember it is the Creator God, the One who calls us beloved, he alone determines who you are. Amen.

1. **Prayers**

*Let us pray.*

Gracious God,

who hears and understands our prayers

spoken in the diverse languages of the world,

forgive us, when we presume to know what are

the limits of your power, the extent of your grace,

and the reach of your Spirit.

Loving God,

who calls people to follow you

from all the nations of the world

empower your Church by your Spirit

to take risks, to make disciples,

and to declare your glory to the ends of the world.

Almighty God,

in whom we live and move and have our being,

by your Spirit give us courage

to offer ourselves afresh to you

to find our identity and worth in you alone

to stand up for justice, to be in solidarity with the oppressed

and to be signs of hope in the world

that feels upside down and inside out

because of the global pandemic of covid-19.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray saying:

*Our Father,*

*Who art in heaven*

*Hallowed be thy name.*

#### Thy kingdom come, thy will be done

*On earth as it is in heaven*

*Give us this day our daily bread*

*And forgive us our trespasses*

##### As we forgive those who trespass against us.

*And lead us not into temptation*

*But deliver us from evil.*

*For thine is the Kingdom,*

*The power and the glory*

*For ever and ever,* ***Amen.***

You might have heard what I have to say today. You might even have agreed with my central argument that our identity is rooted in God alone. Nonetheless, you can see the enormous gap between where you are right now and where you need to be. Our final song is a reminder that the God we serve is a Way Maker, able to make a way where none exists. If you don’t already know it, you’ll thank me later. It’ll be a blessing as you sing along.

1. **Way Maker – Sinach/Mandisa**

You are here, moving in our midst  
I worship you; I worship you  
You are here, working in this place

I worship you; I worship you

*Way maker, Miracle worker  
Promise keeper, Light in the darkness  
My God, that is who you are*

You are here, touching every heart  
I worship you; I worship you  
You are here, healing every heart  
I worship you; I worship you

You are here, turning lives around  
I worship you; I worship you

You are here, mending every heart  
I worship you; I worship you

*Way maker…*

Even when I don’t see it you’re workin’

Even when I don’t feel it you’re workin’

You never stop, you never stop workin’

*Way maker…*

1. **THE BLESSING**

Christ our King,

make us faithful and strong to do the Father’s will;

and may Almighty God bless you,

the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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