

A REFLECTION ON THE READINGS FOR PALM SUNDAY BY BERNARD TRAYNOR

(Isaiah 50: 4-7; Philippians 2: 6-11; Matt 26:14 - 27:66)

We are living in the strangest of times. We may even be at the end of time, we just don't know - for if the current crisis posed by COVID-19 tells us anything it is that we are at the mercy of fate, subject, as we are, to an airborne virus that is impossible to see or detect. Consequently our life cannot be taken for granted. We have come face-to-face with the sheer fragility of life. Great Britain is not so great now, Donald Trump may have dreamed of making America great again but both have been brought to their knees by a virus that is so small it penetrates unnoticed. The world has been humbled and we are all aware that life cannot be taken for granted. There is nothing wrong or harmful in a dose of humility. It serves no purpose to keep banging on about the strength of our economy if the very fabric of society and the capitalist philosophy is crumbling all around us. One of the less well-informed pieces on BBC Radio 4's Today programme last week proudly announced that "one of the positive effects of the Coronavirus crisis is that the birds have started singing again!" I stared open-mouthed at the radio. I had news to share with the programme editor. The birds had never stopped singing so they couldn't possibly "have started singing again". WE, on the other hand, had started listening again and the world around us, now denuded of the incessant roar of traffic and transport noise meant that the birds could once again be heard. To my mind, the smallest crumb of comfort in the tragedy unfolding before our eyes and ears is that we have been forced to slow down and to take stock. Narcissistic politicians may attempt to sell some utopian dream but we now are able to see through their narcissism. We can make a choice

But back to our readings for this weekend. There is a richness about all three readings. The Passion Narrative from Matthews Gospel does not always need a commentary. The narrative is like a jewel beyond compare, its words are to be absorbed and felt. If you can find a quiet part of the house, read it slowly, out loud without haste or hurry. Put yourself at the scene, feel the tension, inhale the heady scents of the Garden, feel the air brush your cheeks, sit amongst the disciples, fidget with them, scratch your nose. Allow yourself to feel the fear and anxiety of Jesus, the emptiness of the disciples' response. They said what they thought Jesus wanted to hear - but without really believing in their ability to deliver on their word. Like a report from a war correspondent in some far flung corner of the globe, the Passion Narrative is a straightforward account of a most horrible 24 hours. There's no need to do anything else with it, except to absorb it.

The first reading from Isaiah deals with the person we refer to as 'The Suffering Servant'. In today's excerpt, the Servant tells us: *Each morning he wakes me to hear, to listen like a disciple...* The art of listening is arguably one of the most important of life skills. It is the art of listening that allows us to hear the promptings of God, the voice of conscience, the cries of the widow, the orphans, the lonely, those who are scared as they face their twilight years with never a visitor or a smiling face. We do God's will, we do what is right - with confidence and conviction. *So, too, I set my face like flint; I know I shall not be shamed.*

Humility is the order of the day and it's fitting that such thoughts are at the forefront of our minds as we begin this holiest of weeks, this HOLY WEEK. We may be locked out of our church but we are not locked out from the love of God and his Word. The second reading reminds us: *His state was divine but Jesus Christ did not cling to his equality with God.... (and)... was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.* Jesus is our model. He showed humility so that we might, in turn, learn to be humble, just as COVID-19 has taught humility to the whole human race. Humility is more than wearing sack-cloth and ashes. Humility is an attitude of mind, a recognition that all we are and all we have is 'gift'. The spread of the virus shows that it does not recognise ethnicity, colour, status or creed. While we scurry around, the virus marches on. We have been forced to take stock in life and we are compelled to recognise our common humanity and our common need for each other. It is a much over-used expression but we really are in this together. There is no longer any black or white, believer or non-believer, male or female for we are all the same, united in humanity and united in humility. By sharing in His humility we will share in His resurrection. This is the whole point of our Holy Week and this is our badge of discipleship.