

Sermon by Bishop Nicholas for Palm Sunday: 28<sup>th</sup> March 2021

May I speak and may you hear in the name of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

This is second Palm Sunday when we've not been able to have the usual Palm Sunday processions that we're very familiar with. I've lots of lovely memories of donkeys, people and celebrations which nearly always involved not only church congregations but a wider community – people gathering to watch or to join in, and that being part of an act of witness and the way in which we enter Holy Week as church and community making this journey of the way of the cross to Easter. It makes me think a lot about how it was in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday – Jesus and his disciples coming over the Mount of Olives from Bethany, Bethpage, across the Mount of Olives (with lots of prophecies, lots of associations with the coming of the Messiah) coming down and across the valley and down into the City. The crowds welcoming him – 'Hosannah to the Son of David' – real cheerfulness, welcoming, hospitality. This is exciting – something is happening – and there are conflicts built into it – there are conflicts built into the story.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus weeps over the city – longing that they knew the way to peace. They do know the way to peace – they are just not doing it. He goes to the temple, and there's conflict about 'who is this that's come among us?' 'What's he claiming for himself or what's being said about Him?' 'What's he going to do and is he going to overturn the religious orders of the day?' 'How threatening is he, both to religious power and to secular power?'

And as the week goes on, what happens is that there is more of a sense of crisis. And what happens to people in a crisis is that they often lose their bearings. That is just part of how it is when things get really tough. And what we see in the disciples, is that those who have travelled with Jesus, who share a meal with Him, are people who betray Him, deny Him, run away at the key moments, who stand far off, and who lose their way. And the story of Christ being raised on the cross and buried in the tomb and rising on Easter Day is a story in which Jesus comes back among us and makes us new – restores us, as it were, accepting our frailties - accepting the frailties of the disciples, comes back among them and renews the community of the resurrection. This is about how we start again when things go wrong. New life, the life of Easter Day is the faithful promise of God: that in the end, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

I don't know how you're feeling about the pandemic at the moment. I thought the National Day of Reflection was a really interesting and good event as people tried to say something about what we've learned from this pandemic; how we are with one another; how we're feeling about ourselves. It's been tough. We're grateful for the people who've given so much: the NHS, but actually all key workers – the people who've gone the extra mile to help care for us all. Actually, I want to thank you as churches, because I think you've done a really good job in terms of being part of networks caring for communities. That sense of 'love God and love your neighbour as yourself'. That has been a real driving force this year and I'm grateful for all you've done to care for neighbours and to make sure that everybody's OK.

But there is something that we have got to learn because I think that in a crisis what happens is that we do lose our bearings, and we just need to check where we are with one another and what the values are. We can sense Christ weeping over communities and over the world, but we have to learn that we are in this together with one another – that no one's safe until everyone is safe. We have learnt something about being a *global* community

We've got to make sure that the economy's right – for the good of *all* – that nobody's left out; that we find ways in which we support one another. You know: the value of life isn't about how much we earn and how wealthy we are, but we need to make sure that's distributed well enough for people to live fulfilled and happy lives; for children to be brought up safely and well, and so on – and we need to make sure we do that *internationally* and not just look after our own. It can't just be about me or us first, it has got to be *everybody*. And we're also learning about (we've had a sabbatical, haven't we) about the environment – and we're learning a lot about the care of creation. In this world where we have developed patterns of consumption that aren't healthy; where we're consuming the gifts of creation and despoiling the earth – damaging nature. We have got to come back better – we can't just come back the same. Whatever we learn, whatever the day of reflection, whatever the process going on is: it's not just, as it

were, to lay blame at people who failed or got things wrong – that's not what Jesus does. What Jesus does is to restore people and make us whole again and rebuild the community – not just as it was, but really building back better. And in the resurrection, gathering the disciples again into a community with energy, and hope and joy, and love and commitment, to live in the way of Jesus Christ.

So, this week, we experience something of the cross. We travel the way of Jesus. We are likely to find ourselves feeling confused like the disciples did. We are likely sometimes to find ourselves feeling lost – because we know we let ourselves, each other and God down in the way we live. We don't always get it right. But the steadfast hope is in a faithful God who, in Christ, restores us in the resurrection to a new life in which we are better equipped and better able to try again to love God, love our neighbour as ourselves and care for the gifts that God has given us. And to try again, and again, and again because we are constantly made new.

This is a really key week in the Christian Year – it is a central week in the whole year for Christians - as we remember Jesus travelling the way of the cross: from Palm Sunday, through Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper, Good Friday and being raised up on the cross, of being placed in the tomb (buried in the tomb) and of rising again. Death does not have the last word. That's the Gospel in a time of pandemic. Death does not have the last word and we are made new and come back better through Christ our Lord. Amen