

**SERMON SUNDAY 5 APRIL 2020: ST GEORGE'S PARKTOWN**  
**PALM SUNDAY**  
**FAITH TEACHES US WHAT REALLY MATTERS**

**Isaiah 50: 4-9a Turn the other cheek**

**Psalms 31: 9-18 In our affliction we pray that God will deliver us from our enemies**

**Philippians 2: 5-11 Jesus is Lord**

**Matthew 27: 11-54 The Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus**

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[1] The readings today, Palm Sunday, bring many issues, painfully and dramatically before us, about the human condition. Why, oh why, must we suffer? That is large theme in the reading from Isaiah.

[2] In the gospel reading there is the famous cry, 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27: v 46). The account appears also in Mark's gospel. It has often disturbed us because it may be interpreted as a sign that Jesus, the son of God, lost hope in his dying moments.

[3] But it may not be so straightforward. The words are from the opening verse of psalm 22, written by David. In my last sermon, delivered on the fourth Sunday in Lent, I referred to the fact that David had a powerful belief in himself. I referred to the fact that, in psalm 139, he says 'I am fearfully and wonderfully made!'

[4] Psalm 22 is a prayer for deliverance from suffering and pain. And it ends positively: 'Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn.'

[5] We are reminded today also of the Jewish heritage of Jesus and how, right up until the very end, he was deeply conscious of it. The famous expression 'love your neighbour as yourself', proclaimed by Jesus comes from Leviticus 19:18.

[6] David, like every one of us, is a complicated person. He is a combination of good and evil, triumph and failure. He epitomises the complexity of the human condition but he remains a hero, reverberating down the centuries.

[7] This may have been, in part, what Jesus had in mind when he uttered those famous words in his dying moments.

[8] The reading from Isaiah is also a lament about suffering, a prayer for deliverance, a protest against injustice when one has turned the other cheek. Here again we are reminded that Jesus famous saying about turning the other cheek (Matthew 5: 39) had an Old Testament provenance.

[9] The complexity of the human condition is on parade in the Palm Sunday gospel readings. There are some fascinating and contrasting characters. The reading begins just after the treacherous Judas has committed suicide in shame. Pilate is clever, an intelligent man, not devoid of morality but cautious and fearful. The chief priests and the elders, scandalised by what Jesus said and done were ruthless in their

determination that he should be 'done away with'. Their conceit blinds them to the truth of Jesus.

[10] There are the cruel and mocking Roman soldiers. That, in itself, should remind us that the gospel accounts of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus are not antisemitic diatribes – as some like to believe. There is Simon of Cyrene who carries the cross for Jesus and after whom the highest Anglican award of honour is named.

[11] There is the cynical, callous dividing of clothes and casting of lots, (which appears also in psalm 22) and may have been another reason why Jesus recalled that particular psalm. The dividing of cloths and casting of lots is recorded also in Luke's gospel.

[12] There are the bandits on crosses on either side of the cross of Jesus, the taunting passers-by, the compassionate person who got a sponge, put it on a stick and gave it to Jesus to drink, the curious onlookers and then finally the centurion and others with him who proclaim the famous words, embedded in the memory of people of my generation (and older) by Charlton Heston in the epic movie, Ben-Hur, 'Truly this man was the son of God!'

[13] No Greek tragedy, no Shakespearean tragedy, can match all this! The truth is that in each of these *dramatis personae*, other than Jesus, the person who is our Lord and saviour, there is something of ourselves. All of us are, at times, no better than bandits. We can be hard and cynical. We can be conceited. We can be indifferent to suffering. We can be shrewd and calculating. We can be compromisers and vacillators. But we can all be compassionate and, at times, see things that others are not seeing. There is

a David in everyone of us. And Jesus may have been reminding us all of that.

[14] It is probably because we catch glimpses of ourselves, good and bad, that the story of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus is so gripping. And, of course, there is no doubt that the message is that we should slough off the bad and put on the mantle of righteousness.

[15] Jesus, in his famous cry from the cross, may, in fact, not have been despairing but was reminding everyone that grim and hopeless as things may appear to be, there was hope, there would salvation, there would, in the end, be deliverance from pain and suffering, especially for the faithful.

[16] The revised lectionary committee has chosen a different set of readings for this Palm Sunday. Following the blessing of the palms, the contrast is marked, especially in the gospel reading. These readings are to be followed in Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist and all other 'mainstream' churches around the world. Normally, in the church's calendar, we read about Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem on this day, Palm Sunday, but way before anyone had heard the coronavirus it was decided this year to deal with the trial and crucifixion itself.

[17] How apposite that today we should listen to the tragedy of Jesus' trial and crucifixion as the world grapples with the coronavirus! A few months, even weeks ago, much of the world was in triumphalist mode. We were confident that we would solve many problems of economics, the environment, human rights, health – you name it. Stock exchanges around the world were at record highs. Unemployment in countries like the USA and Britain were at their lowest levels ever. There were positive examples for us

to follow. I myself was more optimistic about the future of our country than I had been in a decade. 'En kyk hoe lyk ons nou!'

[18] But, the full Easter narrative is enormously helpful at this time of trauma over the coronavirus. We are reminded of how fickle, fragile and transient success may be.

[19] One of my favourite hymns is 'Glorious things of thee are spoken'.

In the last verse, appear the following lines:

'fading is the worldling's pleasure,  
All his boasted pomp and show;  
Solid joys and lasting treasure,  
None but Zion's children know.'

How I wish we had Marnus, our brilliant organist, playing the music for this hymn this morning to the tune of '*Deutschland über alles*', the old German national anthem, at the time of the Kaisers! It makes you think you are already in heaven.

Zion, as we South Africans so well know – we have our own ZCC here – is a scriptural metaphor for 'the faithful' or 'the people of the Faith'.

[20] The hymn was written by John Newton. You may recall that, a few weeks ago, Fr Eben mentioned him in one of his sermon's. Eben recalled how Newton had written many of the great hymns in the English language, with which we are familiar, including 'Amazing Grace'. He (that is Newton and not Eben) had lived a wild and tempestuous life. Newton had been a slave trader but he had a conversion experience and became an ardent

abolitionist. He was even ordained as a priest in the Anglican church! There is hope for us all!

[21] For the world right now, the mood created by coronavirus is like that of the crucifixion. We are plunged into despair. We are frightened. We are depressed. But the Easter story tells us that all this will pass. There is hope. In the words of that great hymn, 'Glorious things of thee are spoken,' we shall come to understand and value the things that really matter: the ordinary, simple joys of life, especially fellowship with other human beings. We shall triumph over petty vanities. We shall make changes for the better. And we shall do so as 'Zion's children' – that is, as people of faith.

**In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**