



**GRAY'S
INN**

April 10th 2022

Palm Sunday

Isaiah 53 : 1-6 & Luke 19 : 37-42

The road to Jerusalem was a lonely one. The Gospels record that along the way Jesus was walking out in front, alone, with the disciples tagging on behind, uncertain, fearful of what might lie ahead. When they reach the city, on this day, Palm Sunday, their spirits rose as people came out to greet them. The crowd shouted Hosanna, which in Christian liturgy has become a song of praise. But in Judaism at the time it was more a cry for help, an appeal for divine intervention. And it was dangerous stuff. For it was bound up with the coming of the Messiah: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord". No wonder the Pharisees were alarmed and pressed Jesus to tell them to stop. This would not go down well with the Roman occupiers and their clients amongst the Jewish hierarchy. This procession is the nearest that Jesus gets to publicly claiming to be the Messiah, but its miles different from the kind of Messiah which the devil wanted him to be. Back then, at the beginning, in the wilderness, Jesus was tempted to exercise earthly power, or risk the consequences. But as he enters Jerusalem for the last time, this is both a triumphal entry and the very opposite. He comes not as a king on a white charger but riding on a donkey. He comes not to force the city to crumble before him but to challenge the very basis on which it stands. And so, as we read, he breaks down and weeps over it: "If only you could recognize, on this day, the things that make for peace".

At the beginning of Lent we looked at the temptation to follow the ways of the world, to control and manipulate, to use power for one's own advantage. We've seen it all around. Putin in the Ukraine. Trump on Capitol Hill.

And as Jesus enters Jerusalem we might weep over our own cities as well.

Remember that question which T S Eliot poses in "The Rock":

"When the Stranger says: "What is the meaning of this city ?

Do you huddle close together because you love each other?"

What will you answer? "We all dwell together

To make money from each other"? or "This is a community"?"

Oh my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger.

Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions."

But as we enter into Holy Week we might pause to look at this more personally as well. What is the peace we seek, and how might we recognize it on this day?

Now there are those who will tell you that the answer lies in one kind or another of religious faith. Follow this and all your problems will go away. Believe this, or that, and you will be saved. I don't usually go along with such claims, but I have to say that I've seen it in places in Africa, Latin America, in countries like Myanmar in Asia, where despite persecution and privation people do have a faith which would put most of us to shame. I think of a Christian settlement outside a black township near Pretoria, at one end a hospice for people dying of HIV /AIDS, at the other end an orphanage for their children, but throughout a simple faith, shown in prayer and in song, that God was present and would hold them in his hand whatever happened.

For most of us faith is a more uncertain thing. We may have doubts. We certainly have questions, and indeed being able to question is part of what we see as a mature faith. But underneath we may still seek that peace which, in the words of the Blessing, "passes understanding". Where might we find that in the events of this Holy Week?

Luke tells us that at the end two criminals were crucified with Jesus. Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy, the First World War chaplain known as “Woodbine Willy”, used to remind his congregation that Jesus was crucified, not on an altar between two candle-sticks but on a rubbish tip between two thieves. The first of them is very angry. He rails on Jesus. Spitting out the words – what a waste of space you’ve been – you could have achieved so much but you’ve ended up like this – the man of power who made himself powerless.

The other thief looks at his life, and the mess he’s made of it. He doesn’t ask outright for forgiveness. Perhaps he thought that he could never deserve it. But he says to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom”. And he hears the words, “Today you will be with me in paradise”.

In the end peace is not knowing all the answers but putting our trust in the one who for our sake chose the way of love rather than judgement, and who promises now, and at the hour of our death, “Today you will be with me”. Whatever happens, I will not let you go.

This what we see on the Cross. This is the peace which passes all understanding. This is the love which has no end.

*Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were are offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my life, my soul, my all*