

## Palm Sunday 2020 (Coronavirus Lockdown III)

### Zechariah 9:9-12; Matt.21:1-11

Once upon a time, if you were going to get confirmed in the Church of England, you had to learn the Catechism – a series of questions and answers taking you through the basics of Christian belief. I wonder if any of you remember being drilled in it. Time was when vicars were encouraged to get candidates for confirmation out to the front on a Sunday morning, to prove they knew the faith they were about to commit themselves to.

Anyway, the Catechism gives the following, classic, definition of what a sacrament, like a christening or the eucharist, is. It says they are *an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace*. An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. You have the thing you can see and touch - a piece of bread, say – and that signifies something so much bigger: Jesus giving himself for you, Jesus feeding you with Himself, the true and living bread. The little bit of bread symbolises the bigger reality.

In fact, the bread is even more than a symbol. It's what the prayer book calls somewhere else an *effectual sign*. That is, it not only symbolises, not only points to something completely different from itself. It somehow actually communicates that thing, helps it to happen. The bread doesn't only point to Jesus: He's embodied in it, He happens through it. If it that sounds strange, think perhaps instead of a kiss between people who love each other. The kiss doesn't just point to the love: it communicates it, sustains it, helps it to happen. At one level a kiss is just two bits of flesh touching each other, but at the *real* level it is so much more. It's love. At one level, this bread is just wheat and water and yeast. At the *real* level, it will be to us the body of Christ.

Well, as you know, there's a lot more that can be said and argued about bread and bodies and words like 'real' when it comes to communion. But actually that was all a long-winded way of getting somewhere else – getting to the picture of a Roman soldier standing guard on the walls of Jerusalem. At one level, he's just another soldier, it's just another city. At another, this is a sacrament, or perhaps better an anti-sacrament. That soldier is the outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual disgrace. He is the symbol of Israel's

disaster. And the kind of symbol that not only points to reality, but communicates it, sustains it, helps it to happen. Every time the soldier goes up on that wall; every time the Imperial standard gets raised over the Holy City, Israel's failure is reinforced. Mount Zion, Jerusalem, was to be God's dwelling place and here it is, under occupation. The world is squatting in God's home.

And the more far seeing Jews of the time knew that it wasn't just a matter of Rome. The whole Empire was but the outward sign of much greater inward and spiritual realities. Jerusalem was occupied by way more than just foreign soldiers. It had been over-run for centuries, its prophets said, by pagan ways and ideas – not just their statues and their altars, but their values and practices: their worship of human power and wealth, their exploitation of the poor, their love of violence, their fear. These are the real occupying forces. That young soldier on the walls, he's just a token of the greater darkness behind him, of what St. Paul would one call the principalities and powers, the rulers of our present darkness. They are what sit, arrogantly enthroned, at the heart of Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday morning.

And the city itself, of course, is also in its way a sacrament – a sign of something much bigger. God, ultimately, is not interested in cities and Temples. Much as they do matter throughout the Bible, they matter always as steps on the road to something greater, to what God had always intended as his dwelling place. God did not want to live forever in a Temple, or even in one holy city and holy Land: these things had always been but the beginning. They were meant to be the foretaste, the glimpse, of God's real intention. Here in these little, particular bits of reality, men and women would see what God had planned for the whole: that He would dwell not in a building, not even in a State, but in the human heart, and throughout the whole earth. Jerusalem and its Temple always stood as signs of that bigger promise: as I am here, so will I be in all the world.

And so, their occupation also is a sign. The Roman soldier stands on the wall of Jerusalem; and what enemy forces encamp in our hearts? What has us under its dominion? What stops us from being what God made us to be? What, just like the Romans bought the High Priests, has bought our acquiescence, our collaboration, perhaps so much so that we've stopped

even recognising it *as* the enemy, as the oppressor? Their name is Legion, for they are many – words from another Gospel story, but apt for this morning. The enemies camped in our individual hearts, and camped in our collective heart, are indeed legion: fear. Greed. Arrogance. Small-mindedness. The love of money. Self-will. These are things we need saved from. These are the occupiers that need kicked out.

And when Jesus gets on that donkey, and rides down the hill into Jerusalem, he is saying that liberation begin heres. That is the unmistakeable meaning, for anyone who knew their Bibles, of what he does: of the donkey, of the branches waved and cloaks laid down, of the crowds shouting Hosanna and Son of David. It is a liberator's claim, a royal claim. He is saying that the end of the occupation begins now; that now the powers of this world will be driven out. The one true King is returning to his own, and all pretenders must give way. Hence the adulation of the crowds; hence the pretenders taking note, and beginning to sharpen their swords.

But neither the crowds, nor the Romans, nor the high priests, really get what is happening. They think it really is all about them, that's what starting now is a struggle for political supremacy in Jerusalem. A clash, perhaps even of arms, between Galilean populists and the Jerusalem establishment. Both sides know how to play and win that game, and on this Palm Sunday morning they were gearing up for it.

And the man on the donkey? What did he think? So difficult to tell, with so much interpretation and fantasy placed upon him, but at some level he seems to have known that the stakes were so much higher. It wasn't about Caiaphas and Pilate and who gets to sit on the throne. All that is children's games: as he would say to the Governor in a few days, 'my kingdom is not of this world'. The liberation he was bringing didn't mean kicking the Romans out. At the end of the day the Romans are just Romans. God has bigger enemies to deal with. Greed. Arrogance. Hate and Despair – those are the powers. Those are what he's going to do battle with.

And you don't fight those by killing people. You fight them – and this is the mystery of Holy Week, this is what we must spend this week getting our hearts and heads round – you fight them by loving and loving and loving. By giving yourself away, by pouring yourself out, even to death on a cross. This is the conviction scored into the depths of Jesus' life. This is what

his friends had not yet really grasped, and what his enemies had no conception of. It's what we must learn, again and again, and supremely each year in Holy Week. You fight this battle, you win this war – the greatest war of all, the war against the real enemies – you win it – or more accurately, He has won it – through what happens this Thursday, this Friday, next Sunday. The great deeds have been done. This week, may they sink deeper into our hearts.

Amen.

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