

Sermon

Palm Sunday 2018

Lessons Isaiah 50: 4 – 9a Philippians 2: 5 – 11
 St Mark 11: 1 – 11

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

May the light of the LORD shine within us. May our hearts glow with the glory of God. May we be at one with the wisdom of God. Amen.

‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.’ These words of acclamation, first uttered by the psalmist centuries before the birth of Jesus, were sung aloud by the followers of Jesus as He made His triumphant way into the holy city of Jerusalem. Many spread their cloaks on the road while others used leafy branches cut from the fields. Riding on a colt, Jesus approached the city from the countryside and entered through the east gate. We know that this theatrical entrance was stage managed by Jesus and timed to coincide with the ostentatious arrival of Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, as he came with great pomp to reinforce the garrison in time for Passover. Pilate came from the coast and entered through the west gate. Palm Sunday is a tale of two arrivals. As Jesus made His way into the city, the disciples sang from Psalm 118: ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD’.

Politics and religion, religion and politics: they are often portrayed as a toxic and lethal combination. The truth is, however, that any religion worth its salt centres on the conversion of the heart, the life of the Spirit within and, in turn, a changed life, a life filled with God, desiring nothing more than to share God's love, healing and compassion with the world. Religion cannot fail to enter the world of politics because human beings are political; life is about power, decision-making and justice. At its best, religion and our heart-felt love for others drives us out into the world. Palm Sunday is a day for both personal spirituality and human politics.

This week *The Guardian* carried the story of Paul Ehrlich, Professor of Population Studies at Stanford University. Since the 1950s, Professor Ehrlich has written about the collapse of civilisation. The eminent biologist argues that the world's optimum population is less than two billion people, which is about 5.6 billion fewer than currently live on the planet. For years, Ehrlich has argued that there is an increasing toxification of the planet by synthetic chemicals and that this is a greater threat to our survival and that of wildlife than climate change. Ehrlich says that the enormous disparity between

rich and poor in the world will also contribute to our downfall. He calls for 'an unprecedented redistribution of wealth' in order to combat the over-consumption of resources by the rich. He concedes that many of his specific predictions are incorrect but that the thrust of his argument is correct. Others besides Ehrlich claim that environmental breakdown is accelerating across the globe: the annihilation of vertebrate populations, insectageddon, the erasure of rainforests, mangroves, soil and so on. Ehrlich calls for a universal policy of contraception to curb growth in population; part of that policy includes equal rights and pay for women. Perpetual economic growth and an ever-increasing human population is, he says, 'the creed of the cancer cell'. High consumption by the rich is destroying the world. The size of the human population needs to fall to a sustainable size. Among other things, we are driving fish stocks to extinction. With a degree of dark humour, Ehrlich says that the one positive from toxification is that sperm counts are plummeting.

Ehrlich, a prophet of doom, may be wrong. It is possible that humanity's physical salvation will come through scientific discoveries and new technologies. When we celebrate Palm Sunday in our context, in the 21st century, a day of religion and politics, we

are inevitably drawn into justice for the hungry, the consequences of climate change, the ever-increasing inequality between rich and poor, the complexities of the exploding human population and the politics of narrow national interest. I do not pretend to understand how we tackle these enormous issues but, if Palm Sunday is about anything, it centres on the clash between the powers and prowess of Rome, of the world, and the humane values and spirituality of Jesus.

Two months ago I took part in a panel discussion in Milngavie. One of the questions was about Brexit and Jesus' call to love our neighbours. The questioner said that the Church of Scotland should strongly support the Remain campaign: we are to love our neighbours, our European neighbours. I did not disagree with the questioner but said that different Christians take very different views on Brexit. I cited the example of the Revd Giles Fraser, the prominent Church of England priest, *Guardian* Columnist and passionate Brexiteer. Giles Fraser is the priest at Blakenall Heath in Walsall, north of Birmingham. Having been asked to work there by the bishop, Fraser says that it has become a life-changing experience. He writes:

In Blakenall Heath my politics changed. Both theologically and

politically, my student liberalism had few answers for a place like this. Indeed, I began to suspect that the broadly progressive version of capitalism that I had accepted might even be a part of the problem. These weren't the 'left behinds' – a term that implies that with a quick hop and a skip they might just catch up. This place was the inevitable byproduct – waste product, even – of market forces, and the price that more prosperous parts of the country had secretly accepted as worth paying for the many other benefits that capitalism delivered to them. The problem was systemic.

On a huge turnout, 67.9% of the population in Walsall voted Leave.

Fraser says, 'Homo economicus – who seeks to optimise their economic prospects through rational self-interest – doesn't live in Blakenall Heath. Homo economicus doesn't buy his cooker through weekly instalments at BrightHouse at 69.9% APR.' Fraser tells the story of a Remain campaigner who was involved in the doorstep campaign during the referendum. The campaigner visited 'a bomb-site of a council estate in the Midlands'. He told one woman, 'You have a lot to lose financially if we leave the EU'. 'Oh, yes,' she gestured to her run-down surroundings, sarcastically. 'I could lose all of this?' In a local pub, the thinking was, even if the country collapses economically, then at least others will know what it feels like to be us. Giles Fraser is no natural ally of Boris Johnson but, for the people in his parish, 'the language of the cliff edge offers little fear to those well-practised at falling over it'. For many in Fraser's

parish, the European project has not worked. Fraser would say our neighbours are those who live 5 or 10 miles down the road.

Do not misunderstand me. I do not pretend to know the answers to the complexities of modern politics, economics and social problems. Often I find myself one day agreeing with one side and the next day agreeing with the other. I do not know to what extent Professor Ehrlich is right about the collapse of civilisation. I am not implying that Jesus would have voted Leave or Remain but riding on a colt into the city of Jerusalem on that day at that time was a direct challenge to the way the world was ordered. In the ancient world, God was with the powerful; the powerful were gods. Is it different today? Caesar was god. Surrounded by mostly country folk, people who were not citizens of the greatest empire on earth, Jesus revealed a different God, a different world order, a place where humanity, the humanity of all, was celebrated, valued and treasured. Palm Sunday is a day for explicitly mixing religion and politics.

As Jesus rode on a colt resounding in His ears He heard the words of the psalmist, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD'. Taken from Psalm 118, this song is a psalm of thanksgiving. It was

sung at festivals after military victory. Wrapped up in this psalm is the belief that God had acted in history and helped the people of Israel directly. As Jesus faced the terrifying prospect of all that lay before Him, He will have drawn strength and calm from these ancient words. He lived and breathed the Scriptures. Into the complexities of His day, into the forces of destruction and creativity, Jesus consciously opened Himself to the calmness of God's Spirit, to the peace and shalom this world cannot give. The Celtic tradition brings God to mind in the midst of everyday life:

Lord of the elements
 All praises due.
 Lord of the oceans
 Glory to you.
 You give the morning
 And the fresh dew.
 You give Your Presence
 Loyal and true.
 You give me Life
 My being renew.
 Lord of the elements
 Glory to you.

Jesus rode into the city with stillness at the centre of His being. Palm Sunday is about bringing together politics, ethics and spirituality. It is also about choosing which procession we want to join. Are they mutually exclusive? Is there a third gate? If we walk alongside Jesus, would we want to be anywhere else? Amen.