

Palm Sunday: March 28th
Isaiah 50:4-9a; Luke 23:1-49

Isaiah 50:1-9

As we move into our celebration today, we need to keep our eyes firmly fixed on the central theme: The passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, this is the key focus point of the entire week leading up to the resurrection. The passion is read on this Sunday to ensure that we understand fully where our spiritual eye must be directed.

Now the reading from Isaiah helps enormously in this when we think what a shock and a scandal the crucifixion must have been for those early disciples. So much hope and trust had been placed in Jesus. He was the fulfilment of their dreams and all of a sudden he was gone. Dead. Buried. Taken away and nailed to the cross in a haze of pain and horror. How on earth was it possible for them to see the hand of God in what is clearly such an evil moment in their lives?

The reading begins by reminding the people of just what kind of God it is in whom they are placing their trust. He does this with a question: *Is my hand too short to redeem?* There it is set out nicely for us: Is God a God of all things, or are there some things in which he has no part to play? Are there problems and difficulties in my life, in the life of this parish and the life of the Church that are beyond him? Too much for him? For which his *arm is too short?*

Now take that and apply it to the crucifixion. Surely that is a moment that reeks with godlessness? Even Jesus seems to acknowledge that when he cries out in anguish on the cross: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* In story of the crucifixion, just before Jesus dies, the sky turns black and darkness covers the earth. What the evangelists is creating for us is the situation at the beginning of creation. Back then darkness and the waters of the deep covered the entire earth and all life was crushed. Darkness seemed to rule. That is what we have here, the apparent victory of darkness and evil. What is recreated here is the end of creation as we have known it up until that point. It was one of those moments when it seemed that all hope was gone, that light had been sucked out of our lives and we dreaded what was to come as a consequence. When darkness rules, we all have reason to live in fear.

It is into that kind of situation that Isaiah is preaching his message. Even at that moment God's hand is not so short that bringing life out of the darkness is impossible. But it is hard to have faith if you are standing on Golgotha.

So how can faith be born again? The Servant here shows us the way. He is one who has a *disciple's tongue*. That is, everything he says comes to him from his master. Whatever he speaks is the word of God. He is a channel for God's words, a tool used by the master to communicate with the world around him. The prophet himself is unimportant, in fact, we do not even know his name. He is only significant inasmuch as he is a servant of God and not a servant of himself or of others.

Significantly he is a servant who lives for others. He does not worry about his own weariness, his own sufferings and struggles, worrying in turn only about the weariness in others he is sent to alleviate. And how does he do that? In this story he is sent with speech given to him by his master. What he brings to the world is what he himself has first received.

That is not easy though as we are reminded when we are told that it is *morning by morning* that he is woken by his master. Service of God is not something that can be carried out sometimes and ignored at other times. Being a disciple of the Lord means day in and day out we need to be attuned to God so that he can wake us for his service. Awoken from what? That is the good question. It is a good question for us as it was a good question for Israel.

The disciple and Israel needed to be woken from their self-reliance, from themselves being the focal point of their lives. This is represented by the bed. That is a place of rest, a quite place for the individual to rest in privacy and alone. Such isolation from the world is not possible for the disciple for he has been called to bring hope to the weary and not rest for himself. So God comes in, *morning my morning* – moment by moment, event by event, personal engagement by personal engagement, opportunity by opportunity to open up the chance of reaching out beyond ourselves to bring Good News to those who are wearied by sin and the burdens of their lives.

Then, in the middle of the song he warns that if anyone wishes to serve God they should prepare themselves for an ordeal. The world will always want to tear down the truly godly man and godly woman. There will always be people in the world who do not want to live in the way God sets out and some of those people, sadly, will be living within the faith community. Believers and unbelievers alike will line up to abuse and tear down the true servant of God. Jesus discovered this as have his faithful servants down through the last two thousand years.

How did he respond to persecution? How have the saints responded to persecution? How does he expect us to respond to such persecution? *I offered my back to those who struck me, my cheeks to those who tore at my beard; I did not cover my face against insult and spittle.* This is what the godless do not understand. The hope of the disciple, the hope of the servant rests not in his ability to fight back. His hope is in God: *the Lord Yahweh comes to my help...my Vindicator is here at hand.* The true servant of God is the one who places his vindication, not in his own hand but in the hand of God.

Conclusion:

This is the message we are given to take with us into Holy Week. This is not a time to reflect on the history of the events of Easter. It is a time when we are called upon to make our own spiritual pilgrimages to Golgotha and ask ourselves where we stand on that hillside. Are we with the crowd? Looking on from a distance, regretting what is happening and moved by the horror of it all but when it is all over, wander back home unchanged?

Or are we with the Priests and the Pharisees, actively crucifying our Saviour in so many ways by the way we live in the world around us? Crucifying him by our inability to live the Love commandment, to forgive, to die to ourselves and to allow God to live in others differently from the way we might think he lives in us?

Maybe we see ourselves standing with the Apostles and disciples, half following along the road and standing in the shadows on the fringe of the crowd. Filled with pain at seeing our Saviour nailed to the cross but unwilling to act in such a way that the crowd will associate us with him and so place ourselves at risk? We are prepared to follow Jesus to the base of the hill but not to the top.

None of us is probably willing to align ourselves with the soldiers who nailed him to the cross yet it is something we do whenever we sin. It is, as we pray in the Good Friday liturgy, *our sins which nailed him there! On the cross.*

Then there is Mary his mother, a woman filled with pain as she watched her Son bleed to death on the cross. More than likely numbed by the shouts and abuse that she heard all around her, not seeing in that boy of hers the person who was at the centre of this terrible hatred. She loved and continued to love and we see nothing but a woman of faith there on Golgotha. She does not yell back at the crowd. She does not plead for his life. She does not threaten revenge or seek retribution. She sits there and quietly cries and given her encounter of God when the angel appeared to her, I suspect that she sat there believing that her senses did not say everything that could be said. She was there believing that even in this darkest of moments God's hand was long enough to bring salvation.

That is what Palm Sunday is all about. It is an invitation to walk the journey to Golgotha this Holy Week.