

# **PALM SUNDAY: APRIL 5<sup>TH</sup>**

## **Isaiah 50:4-9; Mark 11:1-11 and 15:1-39**

### **Isaiah 50:4-9**

This text is the third of four Songs of the Suffering Servant that are to be found in Isaiah. We do not know to whom they were addressed or the context in which they were originally proclaimed, though their message is clear and powerful when placed within the Easter story. They apply very much to each individual who seeks to follow Christ and to each and every faith community that dares to use the name Christian. In this they are quite powerful in the sense of the judgment they bring and the opportunities they have on offer.

Today's third song does not use the word servant, choosing to speak instead of the faithful disciple. It is very useful to follow through the logical presentation given to us by Isaiah, for it is the end result of all of these observations that present us with the outline of what it means to be a disciple of God.

We note that it begins with a divine initiative. This person is a disciple because God has chosen them. It is God who gives to the prophet a "disciple's tongue". Serving God is not something the individual can simply choose on their own behalf. It is important to see that this person was chosen by God for a purpose. God calls people because he has a task for them. It is not about their honour, their glory or their comfort and stability. Vocation is about being called by God to carry out a divine mission for the sake of others.

The task of the prophet in this case is to bring some kind of message to those who are wearied. Our text says "to reply to the weary" but a better translation might be "feed" or "sustain" the weary. Wearied by what? We know from the early chapters in the prophecy that they have become wearied by the demands of faithfulness. The people of Israel have seen their nation slowly eaten away by dissention within and by invasions by pagan kingdoms. It is proving hard to be faithful in times of such temptations and tribulations, when those who are supposed to be linking the people of God to the word of God are busy feathering their own nests. The easier thing is to simply go along with what is happening, mind your own business and hope all turns out well in the end. But they cannot. The call is to faithfulness and that is why they are tired. How can God be at work when all they know and love is being whittled away by sin and indifference? It is the prophet's task to feed them with a message of hope and a witness of faithful service.

Because the prophet is tackling entrenched positions and ways of thinking, he is going to be attacked and the attacks are both violent and very personal. He is physically abused – his beard is pulled, he is struck and beaten as well as personally insulted and humiliated – he is spat upon and verbally mistreated. Why was this? In order to turn the prophet away from his divinely ordained ministry – to call the nation to repentance and faithfulness to the covenant. He is hated because his words and the testimony of his life highlight the failings of those who are bringing the nations to its knees.

But it is in verse seven that we have the great words of comfort from the prophet: *The Lord Yahweh comes to my help...* In the face of all of these difficulties and abuses, God is his comfort. Note that he does not say that God comes to his rescue and removes all of these pains from his life. What God does is offer comfort and hope as the prophet endures what is necessary to be endured. The prophet can set his face like a piece of flint so that the abuses do not harm his inner sense of peace and wellbeing because he knows that he is about the work of God and that in the end God will prove to be victorious. He does not have to fight

back. God will do that for him and God will bring judgment on those who persecute his chosen prophets. God is his help and in the divine court all will be made right again.

That is a wonderful Lenten message for all disciples in these difficult times. As we seek to be disciples, life will sometimes feel like the life endured by the prophet. It is difficult being a disciple of Christ. There are all kinds of reasons for slipping back into half hearted living, where God is not the be all and end all of our lives. Isaiah reminds us that we should be people of great hope, of endurance, of perseverance and of joy – even in the face of the harshest of conditions...because “The Lord Yahweh will come to our help”. We do not have to take matters into our own hands. God will sort it all out for us. In the midst of our struggles, God is our comfort. Things only go badly wrong when we seek to sort things out ourselves.

### **Mark 11:1-11**

If we reflect briefly on the story of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem in the lead up to his passion and death we can understand an important dimension for our Easter reflections. The way Mark has it, the crowds gather to welcome Jesus, praising him as the messiah and sing “Hosanna” to him. They love him. They have seen his miracles, heard his teachings and seen how he has put the aristocratic temple officials in their place. He has connected them directly with God and brought to them the healing mercy of the Kingdom. No wonder they are filled with great joy and want to make him their king. Who would not want to make such a man their king and ruler! All that power and glory ready for their usage!

It is the next story that offers us an interpretation of the Palm Sunday story. Jesus is leaving Bethany and is hungry. He sees a fig tree and goes to find fruit on it. On finding it barren of fruit he curses the tree and it withers and dies. It is in this story that we find the real challenge of discipleship. It is easy loving God and following Jesus when things are well and we can sing alleluias and hosannas. This is all about us. What we love, what we like, what we care about. This kind of Jesus makes us happy and contented but God wants more. But the essence of discipleship is the producing of fruit so that others can eat. Jesus was sent by his Father for the salvation of the world and Jesus in turn invites us into a share in his ministry into his vocation. That is what discipleship is truly about. Not about singing and praising God in the good times but in feeding the hungry, those both spiritually and physically hungry.

### **Conclusion:**

As we move into Holy Week our eyes are being clearly directed towards our faithfulness. We are challenged to let go of a kind of discipleship and covenant living that does not move us out of our comfort zones into expanding zones of ministry to the people of God. Faithfulness is not about what keeps us happy or pleased. Faithfulness is about subjecting ourselves and our lives to the will of God. It will be tough going and there will be many challenges and obstacles placed before us but the Lord God will be our comfort.

“Feed the hungry” is the expectation of God and the demand of his Son Jesus Christ. As we move into Holy Week, let us place our faith lives under the intense scrutiny of the demands of God our Father and our Saviour Jesus Christ, and seek to turn from those things that are self promoting and self serving, to those things that fulfil the will of God.