

Sermon – Palm Sunday – Isaiah 50

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my salvation. Amen.

Good afternoon, it's Palm Sunday! The service started when we read the Palm Gospel, distributed the Palm crosses and remembered Jesus' entry into Jerusalem by processing around our church singing "All glory, praise, and honour to you, Redeemer King". It's a very blatant display of our faith with the marching around outside and our waving of palm crosses and branches. I love it! But along with all the pageantry, there is a deeper truth isn't there? For Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday as it's also called, is the beginning of Holy Week and today we also read chapter 23 of Luke's Gospel, the chapter about Jesus' trial, crucifixion and death. We are about to embark on the most holy week in the Christian calendar. It's a time for prayer and reflection, meditation and musing. It's a time when we are challenged to come to terms with who is Jesus. And our Christian theology is drawn and framed by much of the Old Testament and what it says about the relationship between God and humankind. So my inspiration for this sermon is drawn from our reading from Isaiah – a beautiful poem, one in a series of four poems, about the suffering servant.

The Book of the Prophet Isaiah is divided into three clear sections and Chapter 50 is in the second section known as Isaiah 2 and addressed to the exiled people in Babylon. It's beautifully written in lyrical poetic language. Many of Isaiah's signature pieces come from this section, including the four Servant Songs. These four poems have been used across the ages, from the writer of the Gospel of Matthew, as we heard last year, to current theologians and preachers, to foreshadow the Messiah, the one who would bear the sins of all people and be their Saviour. The fourth Servant Song is

the Old Testament reading used on Good Friday. The servant poems are perhaps best seen as part of the prophet Isaiah's effort to inspire and transform the people in exile from seeing themselves as helpless slaves of Babylon, to servants of God, endowed with dignity and purpose. Perhaps this is how we too can see ourselves, in an increasingly violent world where the Christian message is often drowned out by the secular messages of individualism and self promotion. Let's look at this reading and see how it informs our Holy Week today.

At the beginning of this third Servant song, he declares that:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens, wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

These first two verses speak into the Servant's relationship with God. The servant is a disciple of God! The Lord God has gifted him with the ability to teach, and the Word of God sustains those who are taught. Morning by morning he wakens, wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The servant's relationship with God manifests through the daily practice of prayer. It's not just a thing to be called out in times of need, it's a relationship nurtured by time and effort, listening and talking to God.

The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards.

This relationship is emphasized in the third verse when the servant says I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards. How often are we rebellious? How often do we turn backwards? Isn't it just too easy to convince ourselves that when things are going well, that we do it all on our own, through our own

magnificent efforts. Who needs God? I did it my way. But this thinking actually enslaves us. It becomes our Babylon. This is what our modern world pushes us into. The alternate message of our utter dependence on God is not necessarily a palatable one from a 21st century perspective, and capitulating to worldly norms is a trap that we fall into time and time again.

The prophet goes on with:

I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

If we had trouble linking the metaphor of the Servant to Jesus before, this next verse, describing a suffering servant is much more obvious. The servant is not just a teacher and healer, not just someone who prays daily to God. The servant is someone whose discipleship is costly. This is particularly poignant today as we enter Holy Week, firstly with the triumphant Jesus and then with the condemned Jesus. Jesus who allowed himself to be caught, to be trialed and then to be crucified. Jesus' ministry came at great personal cost, in fact the greatest cost, with a painful death strung up on a cross.

Discipleship can be costly. It can come with derision from friends and family who don't understand the peace which passes all understanding that comes with succumbing to God and passing on all one's trials and tribulations. My youngest brother has recently found this peace, and after years of anxiety and addiction, he is now part of a loving Christian community, participating in his local men's group and finding such benefit and release from it. They are even reading through Isaiah also at this time!

Yes:

The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near.

I think that when we have faith, and when we look for God, we can find God in most places we go, and most situations we encounter. The Lord God does indeed help us, when we ask. And in our faith, we aren't disgraced or shamed for God is near to us. God is ever present.

Over the last 6 weeks, a group of us has been participating in the *Ripple Effect* program. It's a program which builds confidence in telling our story and how it intersects with God's story from Creation, Fall, Covenant and new Creation. Its purpose is to help people who haven't yet found Jesus, know the difference that Jesus makes to real lives today. I believe that God gives us all opportunities to talk about faith with the people in our lives, both people who are regular fixtures and people that we might only just meet. Have you ever thought about how God has made a difference in your life? This is the challenge that Isaiah gives us when he asks:

Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.

It is the Lord God who helps me;

who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

This is the callout! The call is not to a life of ease but to a life in the service of God, grounded in our faith. May our ears ever be open to the word of God and our mouths ever ready to speak a word of comfort and encouragement. May our faces never be hidden out of fear or shame because the God "who

vindicates me is near.” Let’s embrace our faith and move forward in confidence with our God given gifts,

This Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week and the story of the cross, the central and climactic Christian narrative, is told in all four Gospels. Today we heard Luke’s version and on Friday we will hear John’s version. As you make your way to the Cross on Friday and then to the glory of resurrection on Sunday, remember that God is near, very near, ever present and waiting for you to call.

Let us pray.

Loving and gracious God,
As we travel down the road of Holy Week,
be with us in these uncertain times,
help us to be in the same mind as was in Christ Jesus
so that when we arrive next Sunday
we too can confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. Amen