

PALM SUNDAY 2023: St. Mary's Woodbridge with Great Bealings

Readings: Is. 50: 4-9a; Ps. 31: 9-18; Phil: 2: 5-11; Matthew 21: 1-11

God grant that I may speak in the name of the Son, to the glory of the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

So here we are: The Great Week is upon us. I'm back again - (sorry) – and by the end of the Week you'll be aching for a different preacher! And if all goes according to plan, I can promise you, we will be exhausted – done in – shot. Impassioned, crucified, risen. Spent up on the gift of love. At least, that is my personal hope.

I wonder what you're expecting this week? Holy Week, of course is not what anyone expects. I think pace yourself – be prepared – would be my advice. This is my fifth Holy Week outside of the Community of the Resurrection, and it is always different. Ever old and ever new; ever just the same, yet ever a surprise. Always exhausting, always exhilarating; always a tremendous privilege.

We do not know what to expect this week, and yet it is Jesus, our friend, our brother, the true and humble messiah of God who comes near to the mount called Olivet today – anew yet as ever he was wont – so that “I AM whom “I AM” can go with us even as he is ahead of us, as we journey the couple of agonising miles alongside him to Jerusalem, where the majesty of true kingship will be revealed in the perversity of crucifixion and death, and the wisdom of the cross gifted for the glory – the transformation - of the whole world.

And that wisdom – that word – ho Λόγος is prophesied to us this morning by the voice of the prophet Isaiah, about 700 years before it comes. Isaiah who forthtells the narrative of this suffering servant – the King of the Jews so long expected - yet completely unexpected - as man on donkey's saddle, riding unremarkably into his own city to complete the Father's work of salvation.

I wonder what you're expecting this week? Whom do you seek?

The gospels proclaim loudly enough, “We have never seen anything like this.” “Who then is this?” “Who are you, Lord”? We call him rabbi and Lord, and even so we do not recognise him. We cannot tell who it really is speaking to us. We know how to interpret

every sign of earth and sky, yet cannot judge for ourselves the signs of the age in their oppositional nature and form.

But come to terms we must. For here are those terms, those signs in man and colt and strewn palm-branch. We say that he is a king, but he insists first on being called Son of Man. There will be no warlording, no fight, no takeover as the true and humble beloved enters his own city without honour, without pretence, already stripped of everything save a face “set like flint” and a Lion’s heart of love. I wonder what you’re expecting this week? Lion? Lamb? Peace in the form of a dove? Well, we have never seen anything like this. None of the above enters Jerusalem today, and none of the above goes ahead of us to Calvary. No. For all of this is gone already; it is happening in spite of our unseeing; it is scattering our unbelief. All of this is prophesied by Isaiah, by Zechariah and revealed by St. Matthew’s account of triumphal entry. All of this works itself out in the theology of Paul in his modelling of Christian life to the early church at Philippi. All of this unexpected expectation challenges the gift of our own lives from this time onward and evermore.

And what is it that we see? Jesus, not high and lofty on a royal throne, but humble and lowly on a baby donkey. Not exalted, but abased and unremarkable – nothing to speak of. Set low that he may tread in the narrow royal way of love; that he may ascend to the height of the Kingdom of Heaven he is called to inaugurate and bring to completion as himself. So this day our Lord comes face to face with his vocation – with the goal of his Father’s call – as he sets his face toward Jerusalem and toward us – the New Israel he will recreate in his own fleshly self-emptying, when he is stripped of all but love in order to open heaven in the outstretched arms of the truth who is God – son of Mary – son of Man.

I wonder what you’re expecting this week?

What we see at Bethphage and Bethany this morning is not what is expected. Instead, this day, our expectations are transcended by the givenness of this opening liturgy of Holy Week, of the mind of Christ *ho Λόγος*, who disregards “equality with God”, empties himself and takes the form of a slave. This is not what we expected. But it so immeasurably wider, broader, higher and deeper. And it is precisely the liturgy we are called to live and to embody as his disciples of this age. If any among us wishes to become

great, we must become servants; and if we truly wish to be first, we must be the slave of all. (Cf. Mat. 20: 26-7).

I wonder what you are expecting this week? Be prepared; pace yourselves; brace yourselves. We have one another; we have the mind of Christ. Let His mind be in you in these days; empty yourself; live close to the Word of love – the logos whose Kingdom is near at hand, and may our Holy Week together be blessed.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN