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Hosanna!–Save us; grant us victory: Palm/Passion Sunday 2020

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

For the Liturgy of the Palms: Mt 21.1-11

Passion Sunday Readings: Isa 50.4-9a, Ps 31.9-18, Phil 2.5-11, Mt 27.11-54

In Papunya, a remote community in the Northern Territory, there's a very special donkey. Its body is a big metal drum and it has steel tubing legs that go down to a platform with wheels for it to roll on. I think its neck is a car spring, and it's got a metal head with ears. This donkey lives for most of the year outside the Papunya church – usually lying on its side near the bell tower. But I hope and trust that this morning, the donkey at the Papunya church will be having its moment of glory.

I wonder who will be riding it – being Jesus. I wonder which Hosanna song Pastor Graham is going to get everyone to sing; what sort of branches they'll be waving – mulga? And I wonder how many people it will take to help that donkey and its rider across the deep red sand on its journey into the church. It'll be a wild, wonderful time for everyone there.

I remember as a small child how very special Palm Sunday was. I can't think of a bigger day in the church during my childhood. It was gloriously, delightfully, noisily out of control. And when I first saw the Papunya Church donkey, it all flooded back to me – how we used to celebrate this day.

I imagine it felt like the first Palm Sunday did for the children when Jesus rode down the Mount of Olives towards Jerusalem; all those wildly hopeful people – people who had no idea of Good Friday or Easter. They were living in the hope and joy of the moment, just like I used to, those many Palm Sundays ago. I was too young to make the sad connection with the coming tragedy. And in my first church, we didn't go inside and read the Passion Gospel as we have today. So there was no nasty shock of being suddenly dragged down from the glorious hope of triumph one moment to the utter tragedy of the Cross the next. Palm Sunday stood alone.

But things are different now. In the past several minutes, we've all had a preview of the tragic fall from ecstasy to agony that Jesus and his loved ones would endure over the coming week. And the way we've just read it, joining in to say the most dreadful parts, we've owned that we're all connected with this tragedy. We number among the people who cried *Hosanna* – save us, we pray; grant us victory! – yet just now, we're still part of the same crowd; but our cry has turned to *Crucify him!*

This is bewildering – and it has to be. We *are* the Palm Sunday crowd who cry out to be saved – cry out to be led to victory over whatever enslaves us – cry out to the best looking hope in any given time. But we're *also* a crowd who turns against any leader that looks like they're falling from favour. Perhaps we're even a crowd who is capable of crucifying such a fallen leader.

Would it have been different if we were the custodians of the Jerusalem temple? What would we have done in *their* shoes, watching from atop the walls as the slow, jubilant procession came down the Mount of Olives and crossed the Kidron Valley into our sphere of influence; into our power? Maybe the same as they did?

But *surely* we're not like them – or are we? During Lent, maybe

we've realised we're not as pure as we might imagine. We all carry baggage.

If we let Holy Week do its work in us, we'll realise we can't carry our burdens alone; we'll come face to face with our deepest needs. And in the middle of that realisation, we'll find Jesus at once reaching out to us with his beautiful, compassionate love – and yet calling us to keep walking with him, no matter where he leads. We'll be challenged personally, but not individually. We're in this together; and most of all, we are with Jesus. To imagine that Holy Week is just about individual soul-searching is to miss the fact that it's about relationship; how we are loved by God, and how we love God, and love our neighbour as our self. That's personal, but it's not individual; we are not islands; we belong.

So Holy Week confronts us with our failings and presents us with challenges we may never have known about. But Holy Week also enables us to meet these challenges, reminding us that we've been entrusted with priceless gifts for doing so. If we can receive these gifts, we will walk with Jesus. These gifts; what are they?

The first is the one we remember today. Jesus made the crucial decision to enter Jerusalem – to set this week in motion – and he did this for you and me before our people were ever dreamt of. He gave himself into the hands of the hateful jealousy and anger and fear that might consume us; he entered their deadly jaws in our place – with the purpose of freeing us from their power. His gift is freedom – ours for the taking.

On Maundy Thursday, we are entrusted with three more priceless gifts:

- the gift of Holy Communion which shows we are bound forever in love to Jesus and to each other,
- the gift of Servant Leadership ... each of us can show the love of Jesus in the humble act of washing each other's

- feet; having neighbours wash our feet,
- and the gift of the New Commandment – *Love one another as I have loved you* – the gift which shows how we're called to belong to everyone by loving like Jesus does.

And on Good Friday, we'll remember how we've received the most precious gift of all: the life of Jesus Christ, offered in sheer love, to make possible the salvation – the redemption – the rescue – the liberation – the divine embrace – the belonging – the new life – of you, of me, and of the whole creation.

On this day, we turn humbly, helplessly, to receive these gifts together; gifts which God has graciously offered through Jesus to make us whole. Amen