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Palm Sunday

Today is Palm Sunday. It commemorates the day on which Jesus entered Jerusalem, and the crowds were excited to have him enter, and so they plucked palm branches and waves them and put them on the ground in front of him like a red carpet, to usher him into Jerusalem like a king.

That's why we make palm crosses and hand them out. Each year, if possible, I select my palm cross carefully, with the intention that it will be with me until the following Easter. I do this with care, because it represents so much is deeply spiritual and important to me in our faith. Sometimes I will stick it on the wall or the notice board above my desk where I constantly sit. Or I keep it in my bible, as a bookmark of the psalm that I have read that day. I appreciate the people who produce these – thank you.

Think a moment about the palm cross you are holding in your hand. To the modern eye it represents a beautiful piece of jewellery, but to the people of the nations living under Roman rule it was a terrifying symbol, it represented the cruellest way a person could die – and thousands did. Earlier this morning I watched scenes from the movie and it brought tears again to my eyes to think of what Jesus went through in this week. Only centuries later, after the pain had been forgotten, did people begin to see the cross differently.

Palm Sunday, as we call it, represents the culmination of a brave story, like the climax of a mighty symphony, the story of Jesus' short 3-year life on earth. Such a powerful story that has changed the course of history, and changed millions and millions of lives ever since. No one life before or since has ever been quite like his life. And just when people of the day thought they had seen it all, the most dramatic was yet to come – Palm Sunday signifies the start of the last week of Jesus' life on earth. We call it holy week. For many it is the culmination of 40 days of some kind of fasting, and in these last few days we give ourselves to an extra amount of praying, spending time with God in reflection of our life with Jesus, and who he is and what he has done for us.

So as I talk, I want to make just two main points, and I invite you to hold the cross and ponder it, and I invite you to do something with it when you get back home, your own sacred little ritual that will remind you of the special relationship that you have with Jesus, the dying and rising saviour.

I prayed and asked the Lord to help me with this talk, I asked him what he would like to say to the adults and the young people of Christ church. The answer came back as clear as a bell: tell them to follow my example. Of course, there it is: the invitation not just to live ordinary lives, but to follow Jesus fully, to be a disciple – for that is what the word really means.

But first, let's consider what happened during Holy Week, as we call it.

Firstly, note that Jesus knew what this week was all about: see Mathew 26:2 – 'As you know, the Passover is two days away – and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified'. He knew what was coming, and he was determined to follow through.

Note also that Jesus entered Jerusalem on the Monday, not the Sunday. That's no problem – its just a reminder that the Jewish day started at sunset, not at sunrise as ours does, or at least the way in which we talk about our days.

As Jesus brought his three-year itinerant ministry to a close, he approached Jerusalem, but stopped at Bethany, which is the closest place to Jerusalem, like a suburb, like stopping at Kenilworth on your way to Wynberg. There he went to visit some of his old friends, at the home of Simon the Leper – so called because no doubt he had been healed of leprosy, no doubt by Jesus. Simon had become a leading member of the village, and had a large home to which Jesus and his entourage came. Mary, Martha and Lazarus his very dear friends were there. No doubt Jesus was seeking a quiet evening over lamb stew and red wine with his friends. But it was not to be – the fact that he had raised Lazarus from the dead didn't help (in terms of providing the quiet evening he sought) and crowds gathered round. But a controversial act by an unknown woman – she burst open a jar of ointment that was worth a year's wages and washed Jesus' feet – caused an argument to erupt. Very extravagant, said the bean counters in Jesus' party, we could make better use of that money, and so the spoiled what was meant to be a beautiful evening. This is Jesus the friend.

On his way into Jerusalem, Jesus stops on a hillock overlooking the city and the sight overwhelms him, and he begins weeping. Ali and others have done that over Cape Town, have gone to a place on Table Mountain where they can overlook the city, and there have been moved to pray for the needs of the city. Jesus weeps because he can see what Jerusalem needs to do, and what is going to happen to them because they will not do it. This is the compassionate Jesus.

The next day Jesus entered Jerusalem, and instead of basking in the glory of all the palm waving and adulation, he went straight to the temple and there threw out all the people who were profiteering by selling religious goods to people at inflated prices. We all know this story well, but can you imagine yourself there, and see and feel the adrenaline rush. A bit like the police today bashing down illegal squatter houses – lots of anger, lots of adrenaline. This is the fearsome Jesus.

That brings him into direct conflict with the Sadducees and the Pharisees, and he takes them head on. He goes into the temple courts, and starts teaching, using every opportunity. Here some of his most well-known teachings emerged: about paying taxes to Caesar, about the greatest commandment (Love the Lord your God). It says that 'the crowd listened to him with delight' but the Chief Priests were looking for a way to arrest Jesus and kill him. This is the brave and courageous Jesus.

Then the rest of the story of the final days of Jesus' life is well-known:

Judas prepares to betray Jesus.

Jesus celebrates his last supper with his disciples.

He goes to Gethsemane and prays so intently that drops of blood fall from his forehead.

He is arrested, falsely accused, hurriedly tried and found guilty – and the next day he is put to death.

All that happened in this week.

So how can we follow Jesus example:

The first is to live our lives with the same purpose that Jesus lived his: note that Jesus never swerved from his central purpose, his central mission – which was to live a life fully devoted to God, and to go to his death as a sacrifice which would bring life to us all. We may sometimes get the feeling that Jesus did this begrudgingly – indeed in the garden he says ‘is it possible there is another way?’ but that didn’t mean he didn’t want this. He wanted to fulfil his life’s purpose with all his heart. He would do it again, for his life purpose was wrapped up in this, and nothing would swerve him from his course. He had set his face towards Jerusalem, and his face was like flint. In Isaiah 50: 7 we read the prophetic words: Therefore I have set my face like flint.

So – we must ask, how sure are we of our life’s purpose, of who we are, where we’re headed, and how we are going to get there? These are key questions for each of us, and having a clear answer can change our lives forever. We’re never too young or too old to ask these questions of ourselves. If we think of people outside the bible, there are many examples: Albert Schweitzer, for one, who as a medical doctor realized his life’s purpose was not to treat Parisians and play classical music on the piano, but to go to where people really needed his skills – and he ended up in Central Africa, building a hospital that treated countless thousands of needy sub-Saharan Africans, and other hospitals have been established in poor places around the world, doing the same thing. All because a man stopped and asked himself what his life purpose was, instead of just making assumptions about it.

Without wanting to advertise, let me say I see something of this transformation in the people who attend the What’s Your Mission weekends, or in the work I do individually. When people discover who God has made them to be, and what their life is all about, they are transformed and galvanized with a sense of purpose that changes their lives. We stop fiddling around with what is not important, and begin striving for things that make our lives count, living in a way that fulfils the true potential that God has given us.

The invitation to you is to discover – or to rediscover – your unique purpose in life, why God has put you here, what he has made you to be and do, and I guarantee that this will change your life forever.

Secondly, we can follow Jesus example by taking up our own cross.

Of all the commandments Jesus gave, there is one that speaks about the cross: it is recorded in Matthew 16:24, Mark 8 and Luke 14.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me

Three parts to this: deny yourself – this will mean something different for each one of us. It does mean letting go of what is most important to us so that we can grab hold of what is most important to God. The best example of this is Jim Elliot, a graduate of Wheaton College and a man apparently with a dazzling sporting career ahead of him whose desire to be a missionary ended when he was massacred by Auca Indians in South America. When asked by a reporter why he was throwing his glittering future away, he famously said, 'it is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.'

So my question is: what does it mean to you to deny yourself?

Take up his cross: what does that mean? A commitment to pray and study the bible? A commitment to care for someone, or some community? A commitment to serve God in some way, losing some sleep or some comfort? A commitment to follow a course of study? To give money away? To befriend someone? Whatever it means to you, and it will mean different things to different people, know that it will involve a commitment.

So my question is: to whom and to what are you committed?

Follow me: here is the invitation of Jesus to live well, to live purposefully, to follow him in every part of our lives. I want to refer in closing to another biblical character whose life was dogged by bitter circumstances, but who lived triumphantly and rose above his circumstances. I am thinking of Jeremiah the prophet, and I want to close with Eugene Petersen's version of a talk that God gave directly to Jeremiah: I read from the introduction to his book 'Running with the Horses'.

Life is difficult, Jeremiah. Are you going to quite at the first wave of opposition? Are you going to retreat when you find that there is more to life than finding three meals a day and a dry place to sleep at night? Are you going to run home the minute you find that the mass of men and women are more interested in keeping their feet warm than in living at risk to the glory of God? Are you going to live cautiously or courageously? I called you to live at your best, to pursue righteousness, to sustain a drive toward excellence. It is easier, I know, to be neurotic. It is easier to be parasitic. It is easier to relax in the embracing arms of The Average. Easier, but not better. Easier, but not more significant. Easier, but not more fulfilling. I called you to a life of purpose far beyond what you think yourself capable of living and promised you adequate strength to fulfil your destiny. Now at the first sign of difficulty you are ready to quit. If you are fatigued by this run-of-the-mill crowd of apathetic mediocrities, what will you do when the real race starts, the race with the swift and determined horses of excellence? What is it you really want, Jeremiah, do you want to shuffle along with this crowd, or run with the horses?

May God bless you in this Holy Week as you remember all that Jesus has done for you, and as you reflect on his invitation to live your own life with the same sense of purpose and destiny as He lived his.