

Almighty God, we thank you for your holy word. May it be a lantern to our feet, a light to our paths, and strength to our lives, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

And so we come to Holy Week again. But this is holy week will be very different from any that any of us have ever celebrated. During this week we would have usually been preparing to have a whole week of worship times when we look at the events of Jesus' life from Palm Sunday to Easter Day. Today we would have waved palm branches, shouted and sung 'Hosanna' and read the story of Jesus death and burial. On Maundy Thursday we would have washed feet, remember the institution of the Eucharist and stripped the sanctuary. Then on Good Friday, our worship psaces would have been stripped of all their usual accoutrements and we would have heard again the story of Jesus' death and burial. But this time it would have been John's version. And we would have been reminded of the sacrificial love of Jesus on the cross. On Holy Saturday we would have prepared our churches for our Paschal celebration, anticipating Easter Day and all that it means.

But these are not ordinary times. Most of us have been confined to our homes and our church family is not gathering this Holy Week and Easter at all. Some of us have lost our jobs, our savings and seemingly our futures. Some of us are dazed and disconnected and unable to deal with the scale of what's happening around the world. Some of us are sad, fearful, isolated, frightened. In many ways then our remembrance of this Holy Week will perhaps be truer than it has been at any time in our lives.

In some ways our celebrations tend to gloss over the enormity of what being held before us. Our quaint celebrations and remembrances can often seem to forget the central message of Holy Week: and that is that we believe in a God who takes part in the human story with all the joys and hopes, but also in all its suffering and sorrow.

We often have a view of the procession into Jerusalem which is at odds with what would have actually happened. The procession of Jesus into Jerusalem would have been a very underwhelming event, a rag-tag group of rural peasants hailing their leader who was riding a humble donkey. In Matthew's account there is no waving of branches to hail King Jesus, but rather coats and branches were spread on the road, as a sign that someone important was entering the city. And yet Matthew says that rather than being impressed, the people of Jerusalem are rather underwhelmed, asking each other, "Who is this?"

Historians have suggested that a rather more impressive parade would have been happening at the western entrance to the city of Jerusalem on that day as well.

In the week before the feast of the Passover, when the city of Jerusalem would have been swelled with visitors celebrating the Hebrews escape from Egypt, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, would have held a grand parade to remind the Jewish people that they were not really a free people, and that they were under the control of the Roman Emperor, a man more powerful and more to be feared than Pharaoh.

And so a clash was being set up between the might of Imperial Rome and the puppet regime in Jerusalem, against the “Kingdom of God”, led by a wandering Jewish preacher and his bunch of Galilean peasants and other assorted followers. It would have seemed like a very unfair battle. And over the following week it seemed as though things quickly unravelled for Jesus of Nazareth. Bickering soon started among his followers, one organised to betray him, one denied him and the other men in his cohort abandoned him by the end of the week.

For their part, the Roman and religious authorities had obviously had enough of the wandering preacher from Galilee. He had become popular, respected, and therefore a threat to both the religious elite in Jerusalem, but also to the Pax Romana, which put a stop to any change to the status quo. And so on of the cruellest form of punishment ever devised by man was used to get rid of this danger to the powers that be.

In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ suffering, crucifixion and death, the author of the first gospel takes his cue from Mark’s gospel, rather than John’s version. Whereas in John, where Jesus carries his own cross to Golgotha, in Matthew and Mark we see Jesus is so weakened by his treatment at the hands of the Roman guard that Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry Jesus’ cross for him. And unlike John’s triumphant Jesus on the cross, whose death is in his own hands rather than in the hands of Pontius Pilate, Matthew portrays Jesus’ suffering and pain, and ultimately, Jesus’ feeling of abandonment by God in the words of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

And so we see in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ suffering and death a suffering God: a crucified, defeated, forsaken God. A God who suffers in utter helplessness and isolation. A God who comes not in power but in weakness, not in power but in weakness. This is not how we would like to see Jesus, but that is the reality of the Jesus we find.

On Palm Sunday Jesus invites us to join his procession that leads to a different way of viewing the world, and each other. We have come to believe that the trajectory of human history is always upwards, getting stronger, mightier, better. And yet a microscopic virus has laid our world low, threatened our health, our wealth and shown us that we are actually weak and vulnerable. Jesus invites us into that weakness and vulnerability and to see in it the heart of God.

My hope is that if we can gain anything from our remembrance of Holy Week this year, it will be the realisation that our suffering God will never abandon us. In the context of the pandemic we are facing, we can hopefully see that God is in the very midst of the loss and fear which surrounds us. And perhaps this time will also give us the opportunity to identify with those who are suffering in our world and in our own community, because there will be plenty who will be.

Many of us have come to most Holy Week uncertain and afraid. We are therefore entering Holy Week more realistically than we probably ever have. Our closed churches are more like sealed tombs. But we know the end of the story and we look in hope for resurrection.