

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

PALM SUNDAY

SUNDAY 24 MARCH 2013

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Zecharia 9: 9-10, Isaiah 62: 11, Psalm 118: 26, Revelations 7: 9-10

Luke 19: 28-40

“Welcoming Jesus”

The word with which Jesus is welcomed to the city of Jerusalem is Hosanna. A word which means “Help us” or “Save us” or “Bless us” which is really all the same thing. The people that welcome him want him to improve their quality of life, the circumstances of their lives, and their prospects.

And by weaving references through their accounts the gospel writers indicate that this cry for help, for salvation, for blessing goes back a long time; all the way to the prophets and the writers of the psalms. The voices of the past are taken up in the present. Hosanna, Son of David, blessed who comes in the name of the Lord.

Save us, from the Roman occupation, from violence, from poverty and hardship, from sickness and death. There was a lot of that around in Jesus’ days, even in the life of a simple Galilean fisherman or ordinary small city dweller.

You were never sure what was going to hit you next: the roman army, the tax collectors, groups of Jewish guerillas coming down from the mountains, armed robbers descending on unsuspecting travelers, or even one of the many contagious diseases that would rage through the countryside at regular intervals killing many without any sense or logic as to the who and why.

Jesus had shown, on his journey to Jerusalem that he had great healing powers and the capability to come up with creative solutions in time of trouble. He had shown leadership and care, gentle compassion as well as a deep insight into the scriptures. The news about it has traveled ahead of him and people are ready to receive him as their King. This is the guy they want in charge! And they believe he could do it! If the rumour is true and he is a descendant of David, he could be a Solomon in the making! Why not?

The references the gospels use do not only connect the story to the past though, indicating that the crying for help that has come down the ages converges here, at this point in time, where the one who comes in the name of the Lord rides into Jerusalem on a donkey.

They at the same time open up the future that is still on the horizon. To his fellow Christians, to us, who read the story from a post-Easter perspective.

Christ will die. He will not be the King who is being welcomed here with so much expectation and enthusiasm. It will all be very different to what they hoped for or anticipated.

We, 2000 years on, know they were holding the wrong end of the stick. That they should have paid more attention to the donkey and the humility of Christ. That they should have realised that his way of bringing healing and change to the world would not be through a bloody revolution but through emptying himself and staying true to his teachings of love and compassion to the very end.

Can we blame them though?

Isn’t our cry still the same? “Help us”, “Save us”, “Bless us”, “Care for us”?

What does the cross mean for us? Is it just a halfway stage between the victorious entry into Jerusalem of Jesus the miracle worker and healer, the great teacher we ought to follow and the resurrection where all is well that ends well?

In our culture many have trouble with what they perceive as the negativity of the cross, the bloodiness of it, the suffering and pain that is involved. And even more with the idea that this could be something that could be happening “for us”.

Yet the New Testament and the Christian Tradition have kept insisting, through the ages, that it is at the cross where God’s revealing himself in Christ reaches its pinnacle and that somehow it is here where something in our understanding of God changes forever.

God, in Christ, goes all the way. He does not stop short of anything to be with his people. That’s what the story of the crucifixion tells us. Even beyond the most brutal suffering and death, even inside the gates of hell, God is still there, not letting go, not letting the darkness overcome him.

That is good news for the people who are suffering today what so many have suffered over the centuries. That God is in there with them. Someone who holds on and doesn’t let go, whatever happens.

Easter is a result of that holding on, it is a proof that when it comes to the crunch, darkness and death will lose against the power of God’s love. Holy Week is about remembering that God has to fight for that, a fight of blood, sweat and tears. That there is no such thing as cheap grace, but that it costs. That God in his love will not let us go, even if it costs him everything. Amen