

To take the form of a servant

(Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 118:1-2,19-29, Philippians 2: 4-13, Mark 11:1-11)

This week's lessons set me thinking about Jesus and what drove him on through each step of his life. The early church had a clear view on this: So here is a question for you: If you visited places of worship during the first three centuries what would have been the most common and often the most central picture you would have seen?

In a modern church it would be a cross, would it have been so then? No Christians did not start using the cross as a symbol until the use of crucifixion was banned by the Christian emperors; it was too horrible to be used as a symbol of love. What you would probably see would have been a picture of the good shepherd bringing home a lost sheep. This image reflected how they saw the nature and work of the risen Christ and so that of Jesus during his earthly life. It is striking, at least to me, that for them the main sense of Christ's work was not cross-centred, but people centred; a great, loving desire and activity to save and care for us poor lost sheep.

Since Christmas we have been following Jesus through his earthly life. Seeing him grow up and slowly grow in understanding into the unfolding realities and dimensions of his ministry and role. Ultimately, perhaps at the transfiguration, he began to realise the full enormity and cost of the journey he was undertaking and the enormity of the cost it would be to him. Even so, throughout his life his care was constantly for the ordinary people and his ministry was to them; to bring them out of their earth-bound background into a deeper, fuller life as children of God. It did not matter whether they were male or female, rich or poor, educated or illiterate: They could all be children of God. A life that was so near to them; if they would only take that step – the Kingdom of God is at hand, he said, it is right there with you, grasp it and grow into what it is calling you to be. The spiritual dimensions of life are there; take up God's invitation. Life can be more than an earth-limited 'we are born, and sometime later we die'.

I think this is what was driving Jesus on, this heart desire to bring people into the lives that God offers to all. And it is in this heart-rending desire of Jesus that we come to Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. His heart was that of a good shepherd.

His desire was to care and heal, to call those he met into the Kingdom – into this New Creation of God's timeless plan for otherwise limited, earth-bound creatures. He calls us to take the next step into the spiritual dimensions of life, into the ever-enlarging possibilities of our creaturely existence.

Now the realities of human life were obvious to Jesus, he knew his Isaiah and so the implications of the reading that we heard this morning would have been no surprise to him. Living and proclaiming the Kingdom of God and its standards was, and is always going to lead to a fierce reaction from the earth-bound. But for Jesus even those opposed to taking this next step into a wider existence were not enemies but people he loved and desired to see come to the kingdom. I am sure their intransigence caused him so much grief and heartbreak. None-the-less, he recognized their self-centred dreams for what they were.

When we come to the Gospel story of Jesus entry into Jerusalem, rather than walk with the cheering crowd, we must walk with Jesus down this road. The earth-bound people that surrounded him had seen his ministry grow with increasing enthusiasm. Here he was, the Messiah of God – the Romans will get their just desserts, and we will rule the world. Can you feel just a little how this twisted view of Moses' promise and Isaiah's explicit explanation would have pierced his heart. I think that every step along that route of cheering crowds and waving palms would have been taken with great sadness, not joy – they had not heard, his beloved people had not taken his words to heart. For these earth-bound people, the storm was coming. In forty years, Jerusalem would be a deserted ruin and they would all be dead or slaves. Raped, cut open while still a live for the coins they had swallowed to hid them, crucified along the roads of Palestine. The consequences, if not the details, of their choices, must have been an agony for him; it is truly Passion Sunday as we think on it.

How did he feel? How would we feel in his position? Frustrated, angry, heartbroken, bitter. You can almost hear the tempters voice. 'You are a seeking shepherd who has done his best but did not manage to find the lost sheep in time to save them.' Perhaps you felt the same pain in your life on occasion?

The story of Jesus entry into Jerusalem continues in the verses after our reading; here we read that the next morning Jesus came into the temple and, given his state of mind and heart, what he saw was absolutely the last straw. He says *this is the house of God and you have turned it into a den of thieves*. The public part of the temple had been turned into a marketplace. The earth-bound had now gained control of the temple. All Jews had to pay a temple tax and it was set that this had to be paid in Jewish ritual money – the shekel – not in Roman coin. These were minted by the temple authorities and sold with a huge mark up, because it was a temple monopoly. Jesus totally loses his cool and takes to them with a whip. Here we are again, just like yesterday's rebellion crowd. Jesus thinks, I have not been heard, but God will not be mocked, here is another group who have missed the way. Your fate is being decided by your own actions. Wake up!

But does he start the rebellion expected? Nope. Much dissatisfaction followed; the people were all set to deal with the small local Roman garrison and bring on the great day. The muttering starts, 'what is going on' they say. Have we got it wrong, and he isn't the Messiah? Jesus can feel this mood change, his agony grows for his people and what are going to be the consequences of their choices.

Now if you are not sure what happens next come along next Friday and Sunday and find out!

If we turn now to the epistle; what did Paul make of Jesus long journey from his birth to his death? And what does this mean for us? We find his best explanation in our Philippians reading but I will only touch on one small part of it today.

In part he says [that Jesus], "*being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.*"

As I said earlier, from his early days onwards, Jesus sought to do God's will for him. But like all of us, he began as a child, knowing as a child but as he grew, as his life unfolded for him his understanding gradually took on deeper and deeper tones until his work was complete. The key words of Paul here are humility and obedience. Jesus sought in every way to be

obedient to God's will and to be the good shepherd to his people. Going all the way to the point of death for them.

Ideally our lives follow this pattern of humility and obedience too. As we live our lives, we too slowly grow in our understanding of who we are in life and with God. Given all that has happened in our lives, have we done the reflecting needed to see it unfold in the timeless world of our new creation? Have we done the tasks we are called to do for others? For these are the route by which we grow. Have we been humble and loving shepherds? Have we followed the ideals of the early church ? Or as Paul spells it out: *"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling: for it is God who works in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."* Is this not a wonderful promise? It is God's good pleasure that we succeed! It is not condemnation he wants for us but for us to succeed and he offers to work with us on this journey; to be our good shepherd! As the Psalmist says: *"O give thanks to the Lord for he is good: and his mercy endures forever."*

Let us walk the hard road to calvary this week with him, and with passion for the transformation of our own lives in him!