

Palm Sunday (A)

'Holy Week in isolation'

5th April 2020

Is 50: *for my part I made no resistance, neither did I turn away*

Ps 21: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

Phil 2: *He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross*

Mt 26:14–27:66: Passion according to Matthew.

It's Palm Sunday — the beginning of the holiest of weeks of the Christian calendar — and we have the palms in readiness for the blessing and procession in the joyful opening of Holy Week. We have the palms, but we don't have the people for the procession! Or, rather, we have the people to join in, but you'll have to join in at home. In these unimagined circumstances, Holy Week will take on a very different shape for us all, this week. We, the priests, will celebrate the ceremonies, with the beautiful prayers & readings which express the highlight of our Christian faith in Jesus's saving Passion — but you, you'll only be able to participate 'at a distance,' though spiritually united to us.

I often think of Holy Week as somewhat of a rollercoaster: (i) we begin Palm Sunday on a high (Jesus's triumphal arrival, hailed as Messiah, entering the Holy City across the Kidron Valley from the Mt of Olives; (ii) then we have the dark days in which He is betrayed, as Judas makes

the arrangement that will allow Our Lord's arrest away from the crowds; (iii) we come then to another high point, Holy Thursday, the Passover meal that becomes so much more, as Jesus institutes the holy Mass and the sacred priesthood; (iv) and then straight into the depths of the Passion — His agonized hours of prayer in Gethsemane, the betrayal by Judas, with a kiss, the abusive mistreatment by the soldiers, and sham trial with the Sanhedrin, and then the horror of being abandoned by Pilate who knew His innocence and yet handed Him over to be crucified — the ugliest and most painful of deaths. A 'rollercoaster' indeed, then, that is ahead of us this Holy Week, before we come to final and previously unimaginable uplift of Easter Sunday, the day of the Lord's Resurrection, the highpoint of all human history!

2020 is proving to be a rollercoaster in itself. We began the 2020s hopefully with a great new decade ahead of us; then we had the rough ride of the battering of storms in February; and now we have these unprecedented weeks of global shutdown, as every country, and every health service, struggles to contain the infections and the consequent

unexpected deaths that result from the transmission of this contagious virus. It's a real low, and we are all finding it hard — not least as we are prevented from celebrating in the customary manner these great and solemn celebrations of Holy Week. Maybe we also had great 'highs' that we were looking forward to in 2020 — the Olympic Games in Tokyo; a cherished anniversary or family celebration; a longed-for holiday to somewhere exotic; ... in my case, I was really hoping to get to Oberammergau, the famous Passion Play in Bavaria, which has been staged once a decade since 1634 ... that's now cancelled, too, along with so much else, and deferred for 2 yrs. We are certainly in need of an uplift, aren't we, in 2020, after this time of such uncertainty and tragedy.

Well, maybe Holy Week has come at just the right time for us, then! The shape of Holy Week — it's 'rollercoaster' features — assures us of many things, above all that the Lord Jesus Himself entered into the very worst that human life could throw at Him, and absorbed them patiently, lovingly, and without retaliation and despair. His

suffering was great, but His trust in the Father was greater. Think of those words at the very heart of the Passion narrative, in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, let this cup pass me by; but let it be as You, not I, would have it." Perfect trust! Jesus knew that whatever happened, the Father would not abandon Him, and that even in the anxieties of His mortal death He would be held by the Father in life-giving love. Jesus's act of sacrifice is the *model* for human living, laying down our life for the good of others; but it is also the *means* by which we receive the blessings by which we can be good and holy.

We are uplifted, then, by the sight of so many extra, and extraordinary, acts of kindness especially from those working in the health service, the armed forces, the neighbours of the elderly and those self-isolating. These are encouraging, and remind us of the goodness that exists in the heart of humanity. But we need more, don't we? We also need the deep-down assurance of being ultimately cared for, and saved, by God. And this can only come through the saving actions of Jesus that we celebrate so

beautifully at this time of year: Passontide, Holy Week, and Easter. We are, then, this year in even more urgent need of participation in these sacred mysteries, aren't we? And yet that is precisely what we might feel we can't do, stuck in our homes as we are, for the most part: unable to come to church to pray, to process with the palms, to rejoice at the Lord's saving Supper, to pray quietly at the altar of repose, to kiss the cross in which He died, to wait silently on Holy Saturday for the bonds of death to be broken, and the tomb of Jesus to burst open! What, then, *can* we do in Holy Week 2020?

Well, I urge you above all to still make it a week of deep prayer. Remember each day, keep it in its specialness by meditating on the readings of the day, [online](#) if necessary. We are so lucky that nowadays we have the technology, over the internet, to follow Holy Week in video from various churches, including [Westminster Cathedral](#), so make use of that if that helps you to pray. And on Good Friday, pray the [Stations of the Cross](#) in private at home, and keep it as a day of penance through the disciplines of

fasting and abstinence from meat; make it truly a holy day, and at 3pm reflect on the Cross of Jesus on which He died for you. We can still make this week the heart of the Christian year, by giving the Lord our hearts. It's a great sacrifice, to be 'fasting' even from the public life and worship of the Church, but as Jesus this Good Friday is "lifted up from the earth" He can and does lift us up, too. He lifts us to Himself in history's greatest expression of love. He lifts us up, and He will not let us go ...