

## Sermon for Palm Sunday 2020.

Zechariah 9:9-12. Philippians 2:5-11. Psalm 45:2-7. Mt. 27:1-54

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

Zech: 9:11,12 'As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your captives free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.'

Today we would normally be together; not in a waterless pit, but in a lovely chapel at Upton Castle. We would be preparing for the solemn reflections of Holy Week expecting to become more and more aware of the drama that played out in Jerusalem so many years ago. We would be in a sombre mood at the start of the drama, though we know things are going to turn out well for Jesus and for us. But, this is not strictly true. *You* know it because you are Christians who have heard the story many times, and attendance in the liturgy has fed the information into your thoughts, memories, emotions and actions over the years.

What if you were to come across Palm Sunday for the first time? You would be one of many millions of people who do not know the story, nor the reality of Jesus' triumph over death. You wouldn't have encountered Jesus other than to have heard the name as a casual emphatic or swear-word. You probably wouldn't know what a blood covenant is. Everything you saw in a Palm Sunday Service would be alien to you. What would you make of it? As a Christian, what would you want them to make of it? Would you want a visitor to be shocked or comforted by what they heard and saw? They would be out of their 'comfort zone.' And so should we!

During this present epidemic we have no choice but to be perplexed. We are being held captive, so to speak, in a waterless pit; unable to go anywhere without authorisation or good reason. Something, in this case a virus, has forced us to enter a minefield of unfamiliarity. However, apart from the certainty of untimely death for some, there is little we can predict about the next few weeks or longer. Our knowledge is limited because the virus and the situation is novel.

So, we have people around us in our close domestic circle who don't know what to do, or how to interpret what is going on due to the viral lockdown. We are hemmed in physically and psychologically. If we had

visitors to a Palm Sunday Service we might assume that they have at least some limited knowledge of what happens in a church; and we would probably be moved to welcome and guide them. The obverse side of the coin shows a better picture. It shows us that people are not independent but co-dependent, and they can be grateful for the work of others on the 'frontline.'

The people to whom the prophet Zechariah prophesied (around the late Sixth Century BC) had started to return to Jerusalem having been in captivity under the Emperor Cyrus of Persia. They needed encouragement, and Zechariah (meaning 'God remembers') told them of the Messiah who would come to re-establish them in their land, and cause all nations to be at peace with one another. We are reminded by Matthew of the prophesied King riding into Jerusalem (on the type of ass that wouldn't let a person ride them), and later Matthew (chapter 21) relates that palm branches were thrown in front of Him as the crowd shouted Hosanna (save us). The Messiah had eventually come to take control, and there had been a delay of centuries. How perplexing!

The truth is that the people of Zechariah's time (6/5C BC) did not actually see their Messianic King. They received prophetic hope and encouragement, but it would be centuries before the Messiah came in person. They lived in hope; they were 'prisoners of hope' (Zech 9:12). Further, when many cast palm branches on the ground before Jesus entered Jerusalem on the donkey around 30AD, they *did* see their Messianic King, and didn't understand who he really was. How perplexing!

The truth is that we too live in hope, yet are perplexed. We don't know what to make of a world in which a tiny virus can cause so much uncertainty and damage to individuals and to society. We don't know what to say to people who charge 'God' with attitudes and behaviour that only reflect what they have known in themselves or witnessed in others. We are perplexed by the Liturgy of the Palms, and wouldn't know how to start to explain what is going on to a complete novice.

But we *do* know that our presence in the wilderness is known to our Father God. We know that we don't have to remain in a waterless pit, for Christians are no longer captive. We are making our way towards the city where the King already reigns. When a novice seeks to understand what is happening around them, they are on the way too: they are taking a step of faith and moving towards a stronghold. They are 'prisoners of hope' who have been released to enjoy life with their King.