

Reflection for Palm Sunday, 10th April 2022, Peel Cathedral

On the Friday before Palm Sunday in 1982, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands. Forty years on, what are likely to be the last large scale commemorations are taking place at key sites across the Islands. And Ian Faulds, who was vicar here a few years ago, is leading the services before coming back to this Island in retirement. I can remember the gung ho attitude of many as our troops made their way south over a period of several weeks. And I remember the accounts of hand to hand fighting, of the sinking of the Belgrano and Brian Hanrahan's memorable phrase: I counted them all out and I counted them all back.

Little did most of us imagine that there would be another invasion this year, a week before Ash Wednesday, when Russia invaded Ukraine.

Sometimes reflecting on personal experiences can help to make theological ideas real. We've all been following the news, often with disbelief, as we've seen four and a half million refugees leave their country, watched pictures of terrible damage and injuries, and prayed for peace. The news coverage has exposed the extreme contrasts between our lives here and the carnage in the Ukraine.

As we consider Lent – and the challenges of repentance, fasting and preparation for Easter – Global events have caused many of us to question what is going on in the world, what our response should be, and where God is.

Today, in our journey towards Easter, we come to Palm Sunday. Some of us have walked up from the Old Cathedral, encountering some bemused looks along the way. It was great to have a donkey with us for the first time for several years. About 35 years ago I was living in a small scattered Norfolk village. I remember asking the person who took most of our services if we could have a donkey on Palm Sunday. His response was: "If you want a donkey, you shall have a donkey!" and, sure enough, when I arrived at church there was a donkey grazing in the church yard.

I wasn't expecting what happened next. I was asked to take the role of one of the disciples and, in the middle of the service, to go outside and bring the donkey into the building. I was given some carrots to induce him in. But the donkey didn't know me and had no wish to go inside a dark building! I've never read the account of the disciples being asked to go and collect a donkey in the same way since. The Biblical account gives no clue that the donkey might have been unwilling, and that the disciples may not have been skilled at handling livestock.

So here's a tip: When you read the Bible, try imagining that you are one of the characters in the story. The donkey might have a different perspective from that of the bystanders, the disciples or a bird sitting on the branch of a tree. And your understanding might be enriched.

If you read the first page of today's order of service, you will have discovered that a fourth century nun called Egaria described her visit to Jerusalem and how she joined a procession

from the Mount of Olives to the centre of Jerusalem with the Bishop riding a donkey and children accompanying him, waving branches. Four years ago I joined the same procession – some 1700 years later. On that occasion there was no donkey. But there were literally thousands of people. The procession moved very slowly, the narrow, steep hill confined by walls on either side.

I found myself near a group of Palestinians, one of whom was carrying a large Palestinian flag. Part way down the hill the flag was confiscated by Israeli officials. As we approached the gate through the walls of Jerusalem, the army created a cordon through the parade in order to take away the man who had been holding the flag.

Being engulfed in that large crowd has given me a different perspective on the first Palm Sunday. Crowds have power and the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus to stop the crowds from calling out: “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord”. But Jesus retorted that if he silenced the people, the very stones would shout out and acknowledge him. The Jewish leaders realised that there was nothing they could do at that time – with John reporting that they said “The whole world has gone after him”!

And yet it was only a few days later that many of the same people were being stirred up to call out “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

I don't know what happened to the Palestinian flag bearer. I do know that many young Palestinians are imprisoned. The latest figures show an average of 167 minors are in detention at any one time, some as young as 12.

The euphoria of that first Palm Sunday, with the hope that Jesus was going to rescue Jews from the Romans, soon dissipated and, within the week, Jesus was dead. This week we can follow in the footsteps of Jesus as we have the opportunity of meeting in different ways at half past six each day from Monday to Friday – details on the notice sheet.

The Christian message is one of hope, even in the darkest of times. We may not understand all that is going on. We may feel despair when we hear news bulletins. But we are standing alongside the disciples whose lives were collapsing around them as their friend and leader was betrayed, arrested, condemned and crucified. From our perspective 2,000 years after these events, we know about the resurrection and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. We are too close to events in Ukraine to be able to see how the resurrection can transform the chaos there. But we can pray, and trust, and hope. And, as an Island, we are finally welcoming refugees to the sanctuary of this place.

Today we call out with the stones which cannot be silenced: Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!

Oh Christ our redeemer, show us how each of us can help your kingdom be expressed in this place.

Amen