

To Parishioners and Friends of Merrylea Parish Church
from the Locum, the Reverend Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 5th April 2020
Palm Sunday.

Reading: St Mark's Gospel, chapter 11, verses 1 – 11.

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"

They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

"Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Week three of our advised stay at home 'shut in'. So much has changed these past days. The threat of coronavirus has caused massive upheaval to our everyday lives. Countless numbers of folk are juggling child-care with working from home while sourcing food and trying to find space for necessary exercise in fresh air. Yet, no matter the personal problems in doing so, those called 'essential workers' by the Government continue to turn out to places of work in order to keep society functioning. While all are valued whatever their role, there is one group of people whose expertise and dedication is without price in tackling this disease and caring for those suffering its effects: our NHS.

Across the United Kingdom, reported cases of infection have dramatically increased. Purpose-built hospitals have been erected or converted for use in record time, each potentially accommodating thousands of patients. Retired doctors, nurses and other medical professionals have temporarily abandoned retirement returning to work alongside former colleagues and hundreds of thousands of volunteers: all to help alleviate expected overwhelming pressure on existing staff even though, in doing so, they place themselves at risk.

As a reaction to such selfless courage, on the evening of March 26th, people across Britain demonstrated appreciation and support. From the Duke and Duchess of Rothesay at Birkhall, to the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer in Downing Street; from Thurso to Torquay and Mull to Maidenhead came media reports of people

standing at house doors or windows clapping approval with vigour. A sight never before witnessed by our current generation.

A phrase much in my head has been, *'the best things in life are free'*. Don't know why I've been thinking about it, but it's true. You cannot put a price on courage, or freedom, or love.

Equally true is that there is another kind of cost involved in these things that demands not our wealth, but the expense of our hearts and, even, sometimes our lives. Love can be very

expensive. *"If we had never loved, life might never have hurt us so"* wrote Burns. But what kind of life would it be if we hardened our hearts and insulated ourselves from the ache of life? C S Lewis wrote, *"Love anything and your heart will be wrung and, possibly, broken.... Lock it safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness and avoid all entanglements. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable"*.

Today is Palm Sunday. We arrive with Jesus at the gates of a city. The events of that first Holy Week stretch out ahead. If we enter the city together we risk being swept up by events we cannot control. Indeed, they may bring us to the edge of what we can comprehend or bear. Christianity reminds us that, today, we live in a world that daily challenges what we can comprehend or bear: a world in which so many sufferers are silenced, where the innocent are killed and their deaths hidden away under a cloak of posturing words and where living by faith, hope and love can leave us at times looking pretty helpless. For much of what fuels the world's violence is within us, too: the hunger for security expressed in the ownership of land, the mindless fury that bursts out in suicidal ways, the urge to defend what can't be defended because we mustn't lose face, the temptation to the dramatic gesture because we think we need to do something.

As he enters the city of Jerusalem, Jesus does not steer us away from all that lies ahead. He doesn't send us back to the safety of the desert, or the peace of the countryside. Instead, he keeps us close and tells us that these are also the gates of heaven. For even in the midst of the world's most brutal realities, transformation can be worked.

Desmond Tutu, the great South African Archbishop, when addressing the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland said, *"when the white man arrived in Africa, we Africans had all the land and the white man had his Bible. The while man told us to close our eyes and pray. When we opened them, the white man had all the land and we had the Bible"*.

It's so true.

But equally true, as the events of that first Holy Week were to show, Jesus calls us to live a vulnerability by which our prejudices may be challenged, our everyday shaken and our hearts may well be broken – so that we might love and bring life to others, even ourselves.

Prayer:

God of love, today I pray for the vulnerable, and the weary. For all who feel their energy and endurance being stretched in these demanding times: the doctors, nurses and health care professionals and all who work in support services and those who have volunteered to aid them. So much is expected from them. May they be so supported in their tasks that they may find unexpected sources of inner-strength to sustain their endeavours and lives may be saved.

Today, I pray for all who may feel themselves shut-in, especially those who find confining space difficult, isolation demanding, depression and despair overshadowing. In this time of containment, may they discover within untapped reserves of resourcefulness; and may they be encouraged by the contact of others.

Today, I remember in my prayers those who endure ill-health and/or encounter death without the presence of a loved one or those they yearn to see; and for all distressed because they cannot be present in this darkest of time. Comfort, console and hold each one in the arms of your love.

For myself, and all whom I love, I pray that in this time when so much of what we previously took for granted has changed, we may rest confident that your love, forgiveness and grace have not. So may we continue to live, love and serve each other in ways you have shown us to do. And so, I sum up my prayers this day by saying the family prayer of Jesus: Our Father in heaven hallowed by your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. AMEN.