**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Palm Sunday 9 April 2017**

**‘The Palms’** **Matthew 21:1-11 Jesus Comes to Jerusalem as King**

21 As they approached Jerusalem … Jesus sent two disciples, 2saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”… 6The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. 8A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” 10When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” 11The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

During this Holy Week we are being likened to some different objects! Last week I suggested that the tomb in which Lazarus was laid might represent ourselves, the soul of us, asking what had died within us that we might need to allow to come to life again. Today, Malcolm Guite in his sonnet for Palm Sunday suggests the whole of Jerusalem represents our heart and that Jesus is seeking to enter there. Malcom ruminates over whether or not his particular heart is ready to welcome such an enigmatic person. Just like the crowds on Palm Sunday – there is initially the poet realises an easy, enthusiastic welcome, raised hands, being caught up in the singing, waving the palms which are close to hand. We can assume with that ready acceptance of a new, exciting leader, the job is done.

But, Guite reminds us behind that easy welcome is a more enduring piece of work to be achieved. There is challenge and the reversal of how this world works, a turning upside down of all we expect and desire. And in his honest assessment of himself, Malcolm writes: *I know what lies behind/The surface flourish that so quickly fades; Self-interest, and fearful guardedness, /The hardness of the heart, its barricades,/And at the core, the dreadful emptiness/Of a perverted temple.*

It is one thing to realise we carry within us our own inner resistance to change – whether in society about us, in the organisational details of our lives, or within our very hearts and souls. It is another to name that at the core of us there might be a perverted temple – that our working spirituality – the spirituality we actually follow, not the one we name with our lips - has not quite got it right.

With all the influences upon us – whether a more conservative up bringing, or a living in this world with a caricature of Christian faith which we barely recognise as the Way we follow, we can take on board unexamined assumptions and let them lie there at the heart of us undisturbed. Only deeper sustained reflection brings them to light, or therapy or spiritual direction or a spiritual discipline pursued through thick and thin. Sometimes it is tragedy which does it for us, As Alice Walker puts it:

*Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like shit.*

(Shit by the way is in the Bible – the actual word just got lost in translation).

Sometimes only sorrow and tragedy can shake our bright ideas and comfortable frameworks. Much in the same way the crucifixion of this man being so warmly welcomed into the city by the crowds today; the same way his crucifixion shook his disciples, rattled the world, and has continued to challenge the world for millennia.

So we can celebrate today what Malcolm Guite calls the easy feelings and get caught up in the singing, but eventually we will be faced with someone more visceral to deal with. We will reflect on how we might respond to that later in the Gathering…

**‘**[**Palm Sunday**](http://audioboo.fm/boos/734951-palm-sunday-sonnet)**’** by Malcom Guite from *Sounding the Seasons,* Canterbury Press.

Now to the gate of my Jerusalem,

The seething holy city of my heart,

The saviour comes. But will I welcome him?

Oh crowds of easy feelings make a start;

They raise their hands, get caught up in the singing,

And think the battle won. Too soon they’ll find

The challenge, the reversal he is bringing

Changes their tune. I know what lies behind

The surface flourish that so quickly fades;

Self-interest, and fearful guardedness,

The hardness of the heart, its barricades,

And at the core, the dreadful emptiness

Of a perverted temple. Jesus come

Break my resistance and make me your home.

**‘The Passion’ Matthew 26 The Plot Against Jesus**

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| 26 When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 2“As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” 3Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, 4and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. 5“But not during the festival,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.” **Jesus Anointed at Bethany** 6While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, 7a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. 8When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. “Why this waste?” they asked. 9“This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.” 10Aware of this, Jesus said to them, “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 11The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. 12When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. 13Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”  |

This vignette, redolent with the perfume of expensive ointment, has echoed down the centuries.[[1]](#footnote-1) Dinners such as these were held in the courtyards of private homes and ordinary people were allowed in to watch the banquet happening and listen to the honoured guest.[[2]](#footnote-2) It would have been easy for the woman to gain entry, though not specifically invited, but it would still have taken great courage to go up to Jesus and anoint his feet, pointing out behind him as he reclined, Roman style,[[3]](#footnote-3) at the table.

Unlike the easy anonymity of the crowds, the ‘rush of easy feelings’, this woman is like the people to whom Shug refers in *The Colour Purple.* She’s known sorrow and tragedy; elsewhere she’s labelled a sinner, possibly a prostitute. She’s had to reach into the depths, past the ‘barricades’. It seems in some past encounter, Jesus helped her see how perverted the temple at the heart can be, perhaps how perverted her own spiritual framework has become – allowing others to define and label her in ways she does not deserve because she is more done to than anything else. We referred to this phenomenon briefly two weeks ago.[[4]](#footnote-4) Our life path may or may not have taken this same route, but when we are forced to look deep inside, beyond our barricades, we see what we have been avoiding – about ourselves, others and the entity we name God, learning deep and marvellous things.

In the 1998 film *What Dreams May Come,* Robin Williams is Chris Neilson, who dies before his wife, Annie. Chris and Annie are soulmates. We’ve already seen Annie is fragile, as she attempts suicide on the tragic death of their two children earlier. The movie depicts it being largely the couple’s loving relationship which pulls her out of deep depression. Then Chris Nielson also suddenly dies in a vehicle accident, and – now in a colourfully depicted heaven - finds Annie has subsequently taken her own life and according to the theology of the movie, gone to hell. (not a theology I hold, by the way).

Chis decides to go into hell and get Annie. He is warned, but makes the trip with a guide. It’s fascinating to see how hell is depicted – burning fires, ship wrecks, mud-fields packed with human skulls, imprisoned souls in torment - all the metaphors from scriptures, literature and poetry.

When Chris finally arrives where his Annie is, the imagery is surprising. She’s trapped in a burnt-out wreck of their former home. That burned out wreck in turn is on the ceiling (which now forms the floor) of an upside down cathedral. The wreck of the house sits in the bowl shape made by the upside down fan vaulting and around them are ecclesiastical stained glass windows with their gothic style points facing downwards. Here ‘at the core’ is the ‘dreadful emptiness’ of a ‘perverted temple’ – the upside down church and the burned out home.

Chris goes in alone. Not recognising him, Annie will not follow him out. He thinks he has failed. He’s been told he only has a few minutes before being absorbed into hell himself. Chris takes all those minutes, then leaves, but only to tell his guide to return because he is not leaving Annie alone in hell. The movie shows us it is that act of Chris giving up his chance of remaining whole and together which in the end saves Annie. The ‘saviour’ in the story has enabled the redemption of another because *all* was risked*, all* was given.

This woman in the Gospel story gives all – not in time and duty or hard work, or positions on church committees served over many years – but all of herself to her spiritual journey of discovery – she is present, she risks, she uses all her courage, she gives the most precious possession she has – at many levels, she commits everything to the journey. Her actions foreshadow the way Jesus will give all by remaining true to his message which he *knows* is putting him on a collision course with ecclesiastical authorities

The happy, laughing, singing, crowd experience of Palm Sunday has its place in our Story. The crowds’ adulation must have warmed Jesus’ heart. But, also, there need to be these kinds of moments when we, alone, give what we need to give to resource the next step on our journey along the Way.

I think it is always a clue when a story of a woman is included in the Gospels that that woman was a key member of the early Church. This profound moment is one which has the power and significance to lead to others benefiting from it in some way. Imagine what this woman did next as a result of this encounter in her life! I wonder what it was.

But right now we, almost 2000 years down the track, we can learn from her agency and intentionality, her taking her own steps, unconventional though they might be in her place and time, to do what was necessary for spiritual health.  The words attributed to Jesus capture this: “Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” Let there be both Palms and Passion in your Easter experience this year. So may it be.

**‘Body Language’** by Susan Jones from *Women Like Me; reflections on women scripture and life.*

Woman-with-no-name

why do you wear the label ‘sinner’?

What was it you had done or had done to you

that earned you that tag so publicly?

And, knowing yourself to be so described

what happened inside that gave the courage,

the energy, to gatecrash the party at Simon’s house

what deep inner need drove you there

your precious jar of ointment carefully cradled next to your body

What was going on inside

to over-ride for you the murmurs of disapproval

the angry mutterings

the hiss of air sucked in between irritated teeth?

And, having taken them by surprise,

when you reached his feet

bursting into tears with the grief and pain

and joy and relief and deep sadness

how did it feel to offer, without the customary restraint,

all your heart’s devotion, your whole self, your very being

acting it out with your body

this much abused body, now wholly used

to express the deepness of your self

a deepness which till now

you had held secret, safe, inviolate,

hidden away from men.

Glad to do this for him,

filled with a grateful love for he did not accept in lordly manner,

expecting you to grovel,

but accepted with understanding eyes so you were made whole.

So you, having known the depths of pain, despair, violation

could do for him out of that dark experience

out of the deep spaces the sorrows of your life had carved into you

out of that black place, now illumined with love

you could do for him what Simon never could - anoint him for his burial

You and he knew it

because you and he knew pain and joy are one

and grief and love are intertwined.

You and he knew what happens when the body is taken by force

when violence is the apparent winner

You and he knew that love missing

makes the finest dinner tasteless

and love present gathers all together

and makes us

whole.

Susan Jones 027 321 4870 04 472 9376 (work) minister@standrews.org.nz

1. It’s a story told in several versions - they may refer to one incident or to more than one occasion, it’s hard to tell. Sometimes it is Simon the Pharisee’s house, in this case Simon the Leper – perhaps they were the same person? There’s a back story worth thinking about! Sometimes this scene is set in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary and it is Mary who anoints Jesus. This story has been attributed to Mary Magdalene, but is probably *not* her. The association of Mary Magdalene with this story is

from where some of the negative reputation attached to the Magdalene has come. Tucked away in this story we have here an example of a kind of working spirituality to which I referred earlier. The disciples are no doubt arrested at the woman’s intrusion and emotion, perhaps even secretly impressed while being made extremely uncomfortable, but their working spirituality is about money and waste and extravagance. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “It was permissible in that day for uninvited guests to come and listen when an important person was a guest in someone’s home. The needy could also come to receive some of the leftovers.” https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-5-invitation-dinner-luke-736-50 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A style adopted by the Jews from the Romans. The usual Jewish custom had been to sit cross legged at table. http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/the-fourfold-gospel/by-sections/jesus-feet-anointed-in-the-house-of-a-pharisee.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. When we considered the man born blind – blaming the victim for what is beyond their control and more likely due to a systematic occurrence. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)