

Sermon Palm Sunday Year B 2018

You know the saying: *'you need to know where you have come from to know where you are going.'* As for individuals, so for societies, for cultures, and for the church, the followers of Jesus. To proclaim the Gospel with boldness and integrity and courage - to state anew the good news of God's love for us - we need *to know* where we have come from. To step forward in the way of faith we need to know our stories *well*, the stories which set us apart, which mark our identity. Because otherwise we run the risk of simply drifting, not really knowing who we are, or where we are going; not really sure what we are all about, not really excited about anything. Not really enthused about anything. Complacent. Indifferent. But, my friends, our stories *do not permit* drifting or complacency or indifference. Our stories are Truth and they are Life! And told not just for us. They are stories for all people for all the ages.

And so, these coming days we re-tell, re-hearse, re-live the stories that tell us *who we are*. We suspend time, step out of time - if we allow ourselves - to see how these ancient (timeless) stories might speak to us anew. The temptation is to say, of course, *'we know the stories, we grew up with them when we were kids. It's the same every year. Same readings. Same hymns. Same rituals...'* But, are *you* the same? Are you the same person last year as you are now? Has nothing happened since last we began this cycle? Well, of course not!! Each, day, each year, each time we gather to re-tell and re-live the stories, we bring something new.

This is, in part, the reason why the early church recorded the sayings and events from the life of Jesus. Not just as historical documents. But because they believed they could speak to all peoples for all ages, each day, each year. And how true was their foresight! Yes. Our stories are indeed timeless. So, no novelty needs to be introduced. No clever sermon will add anything. We need only to be faithful to what the Scriptures and the Tradition have handed on to us. Our task - the task of our gatherings over this week - is to simply allow the words and actions to wash over us.

If we do this, if we allow the beautiful words, the striking ceremonies, the silences, the songs of joy, and of sadness, to wash over us we will discover anew the richness, the wonder of our sacred stories. They are a magnificent tapestry. And some 2 billion people (who says faith is dead?!) in the world today, and all this week, will find some meaning in these stories, will find an aspect of this tapestry they haven't noticed before. This is *part* of why what we do is so important. *It doesn't try to say everything all at once*. At different moments different things will be said, will be emphasised, and we notice them in different years and at different periods of our lives.

But we live in a world nervous of such things, suspicious of such a complex, nuanced, multi-layered reality. We live in a world where glib one-liners rule. Where easy answers and quick fix solutions seek our attention. We live in a world where the trend is to flatten everything out to nice, easy, bite-size portions; one set of values worth having. One look worth being. Even the church can fall into this trap, offering its faithful only cliché or pleasantries. Perhaps it sees faith flattened out - cheapened - into a recipe for happiness

and success. How far is this brand of religion from what we encounter today and throughout this week!

Still, it seems part of human nature is to try and avoid the hard things in life, to soften the hard edges, to look the other way at things too disconcerting and confronting. So much of our lives is about either maintaining an illusion of who we are to the world around us, or trying to avoid the difficulties and complexities of life. And so, the epidemic of addiction in our culture - any number of things to hide us from reality, to supposedly help us cope. Drugs (illicit or prescription...) and alcohol all predictable enough. But so too our obsession with accumulation, obtaining the latest technology. So too our addiction to busyness, to frenetic activity, held up as a virtue, and we expect it, think it's a good thing! All the while letting life pass us by, missing what matters. And now euthanasia legal in this state, it will become just the latest in a long list of tricks and deceptions to help us avoid the hard realities of life.

In the Passion Narrative we have heard today, Mark tells us how, as Jesus hangs on the Cross, moments before his death he is offered a sponge with sour wine. Now, *all* the gospels include this detail in various forms. And this vinegary wine in essence a cheap substance aimed at deadening the pain. Mark and Luke notes how it is simply offered to Jesus and is ambiguous whether he takes it. Matthew, though notes Jesus' refusal to take what is offered. He faces his death conscious, not avoiding the full reality of it all. Not numbing his senses or seeking an easy way out.

Now, we might think the offer to of this vinegary substance as something of a kind act, to alleviate something of Jesus' thirst, which is important in the way John presents detail to us. But for Mark, at the back of their minds is the psalm verse, '*and they gave for my bread gall, and for my thirst they give to drink vinegar.*' For the psalmist, the Just One was given bitter food by his enemies. The giving of gall and vinegar *not* an act of kindness, but a further *mockery*. Surely it is true that our attempts to escape the hardships of life, our avoidance of suffering and the complexities of life, our hiding behind busyness and stuff and addiction, *they* make mockery of our humanity. These things do not enhance our lives. They diminish them! Or we push them on others, hoping to drag others down to our flattened existence. Addiction is contagious. Look at the world around us! Look how many mind-numbing, life-numbing options are presented to us as attractive, as good, natural, moral! The bystander at the cross who offering the vinegary wine is simply seeking to pull Jesus away from experiencing the full awfulness of the cross.

As Christians we seek to engage life head on, honest, real: with our lives, with each other, with God. As Christians we can't settle for either a flattened out, numbed faith or a flattened out, numbed existence. That is what makes this week so important. In the sacred story we are called to enact and relive we see the *full spectrum* of human life displayed. It is the story of failure and victory, disappointment and ultimate conquest. It places before us the full scope of human life and death, the vast range of emotion and complexity. Let us not deaden our senses to any of it. Let us allow the words and sacred actions to work their power in us. And let us trust that as for Christ, so for us: God remains present in it all. Amen.