

Green Hearts

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 10 April 2022

A reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Palm Sunday C

Isaiah 50: 4-9a; Luke 19.28-40

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

I want to talk this morning briefly about three things - about 'green' leaves; about fickleness and about donkeys...

In the mid-1980s, a group of us from our theological college used to go one night a month to the women's CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) camp at Greenham Common, to offer a prayer vigil and to keep watch, so that for that night, at least, the women could sleep without fear of harassment from the police, who would not interfere with a group of well-meaning do-gooders singing hymns and offering prayers. It was a gentle enough protest. We were indeed well-meaning, but not particularly effective or experienced – only one of us was smart enough to bring a bottle of whiskey to keep us warm for example!

Very early one morning after such a vigil, we wandered around the perimeter fence of the base picking up the flowers and banners that the military had torn down. But when the police approached, we did not continue – we were cowardly (or wise!) enough to know that our arrest at that point would serve little purpose in the scale of things. Yet I often recall the few flowers I managed to push through that fence before I was stopped. A naïve offering, a 'green leaf' offering, an offering quickly to be pulled down again and ignored – seemingly perhaps pointless. Yet it happened.

For me personally, and for those others who acted similarly, it marked something – a determination of heart and will; a desire to see a change. The Greenham protest – the longest women's protest for peace in history, was eventually successful in provoking the removal of nuclear weapons from that base. Though forty years on the threat of nuclear war looms once again. Forty years ago, 200 women dressed as teddy bears scaled the fences and commenced a picnic – teddy bears versus armed soldiers – a protest imaginative, audacious and, while seemingly 'green' and ineffective at the time, still resonating in our cultural and political history. Power is not just about force of arms; it is about the capacity to capture hearts.

I think the first Palm Sunday was a bit like that – not grand; not very effective; certainly, pretty politically naïve – but it left a mark on hearts and lives that is still reverberating today.

The Romans liked green leaves, specifically palm leaves and of course laurel. They turned them into crowns to signal victory. So, there is real irony in greeting Jesus with branches of palm. Victory is being proclaimed, but the battle is only just beginning. Jesus will be the victor but not in the game the authorities are playing.

This mockery of a victory parade, this caricature of a triumphal entry sends a signal, however small, that cannot be ignored, and which will lead to his arrest, his sham trial and execution. The question for us is - what do our palm fronds today signal? Are they a 'green' offering, naïve perhaps but real? Are they a pledge of our own determination that the world we know changes for the better? Or are they just a bit of bit of colour, a little ticker tape brightening our path?

Have we the passion to enter Jesus's passion, fully and deeply in these coming days, or will we, like those first disciples, run away and hide till Easter Day? Whatever we decide to do, Jesus will not think the less of us. He knows what we are like and that we cannot bear too much reality as Eliot said. Yet, if we can pick up our palms, waving them in that 'green' offering of hearts and lives, and follow along the path of this Holy Week, we will find our faith deepened and enriched, our commitment reinvigorated, and our hearts matured.

However, it is not easy to stay with him. We all know the fickleness of public opinion. Fortunes and reputations can all be won and lost in a day. On Palm Sunday Jesus was still popular, with some folk at any rate. There is a sense of youthful enthusiasm, naiveté, and even festivity about the stories of the entry into Jerusalem. Whether or not this tale is a literary device, a piece of mere theological sleight of hand, its narrative resonates with our own experience - we know how easy it is to be swept along with the crowd, and how difficult it is to continue to hold an opinion once it no longer holds safety and communal respect.

The Palm Sunday story reminds us that powerful forces were already plotting to get rid of Jesus, as the powerful always will when confronted by a challenge to their position. Yet they feared the crowd, green as they were, rather as politicians and military leaders feared the women at Greenham Common. Rather, as politicians even now, fear those on all sides who protest for peace.

The Jerusalem establishment needed something to turn the mood of the majority. We cannot be sure what that was, but it seems likely that Jesus's actions in the temple, overturning the tables of the money changers and driving out the street traders had something to do with that change of mood. These actions perhaps provided the authorities with the pretext they needed and the means to manipulate the crowds. Some writers think that the whole Jerusalem economy relied on the temple trade.

If that was the case, it is understandable that even those who had applauded Jesus for healing on the Sabbath or liked the stories - might begin to shake their heads. When money becomes involved, people suddenly decide that the prophet is a troublemaker who can no longer be tolerated. Hard heads, and hard hearts, are quick to stamp on idealism and condemn enthusiasm for an equality perceived as green and naïve. Hard hearts crack, and open doorways in the human being that let in fear and anger and all manner of evil.

But we know better! We know that all are truly equal in the eyes of God; we know that money and power do not have the final victory; we know that 'green leaves' though they may be - faith, hope and love will abide when all else perishes. And we know that we each have a part to play in keeping those green leaves alive. Our task is to be faithful and not fickle in the face of false assertions of power and control.

Which brings me to the donkeys.

A donkey was not a horse. It was not an animal that signified power or authority. Victorious Roman generals rode into Jerusalem, through the other gate, on their great battle horses, telling the world of the might of Rome and its emperors. Horses can be used to intimidate and the beating of police truncheons on thighs in anticipation of a mounted charge is a sound filled with dread for protestors. Horses are for battle.

A donkey on the other hand was a useful animal, the equivalent of a car, a truck and a tractor all rolled into one, in our money. It was not glamorous. It signalled humility not grandeur. Yet my goodness it was useful. Have you ever wondered what the disciples would have done if the owners of the donkey had said 'no'? Their assent was almost as important as that of that other faithful disciple Mary, without whose 'yes' Jesus could not have been born. And why did they agree? *'Because The Lord has need of it'*.

Our Inclusive Bible renders *'the Rabbi has need of it'* and I understand quite well the theological and pastoral reasons for that kind of change. But I think, in this particular spot, *'The Lord has need of it'*, translating the Greek *ho kyrios*, Lord, is not only literally accurate, but it is also demanded by the context. Those usually riding into Jerusalem on horses were lords, with all the trappings of human power and authority. Jesus seeking a donkey, for a peaceful protest is the exact opposite, and the word 'Lord' is thereby subverted, and we need to hear the subversion in Jesus's chosen word in order to understand the power of the protest. It is as if the Greenham women in their teddy bear costumes were to ask for bolt cutters and to say, 'the "police" need them'. "Police' in furry coats.

But *'the Lord has need of it'*, (*the 'Rabbi has need of it'* if that is more accessible to you) is a phrase to ponder deeply. For do you know, I believe that every one of us here this morning has our donkey. We have that thing, that possession, that talent, that set of connections, that nest egg of money, that calling that God has given uniquely to us. It is our donkey. And at some point - maybe at many points - God is going to say to us, *'I need that now'*.

And we need to be ready to say *'yes, of course, here it is, do with it whatever you need.'* So, between now and Easter, one little thing we can do is to think about our donkey- we can talk to God and ask *'what's my donkey? What's the thing that only I have, that is needed? Show me how and when to offer it'*. And if we all do that, I can pretty much guarantee that what Jesus called *'the kingdom of God'* will be advanced in this place. It may not seem like much - it may seem green or naïve – but it is the one thing necessary. As R.S Thomas expressed it with characteristic fierce economy in writing his poem *'The Kingdom'*:

*It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.*

So, this Palm Sunday, let us take our green leaves - not just in our hands, but in our hearts as signs of our commitment to follow.

Let us pray that we will not be turned aside like the fickle crowds by distractions of money, or family or power, and let us be ready to offer our 'donkey' in the service of our Lord.

Amen.