

Introduction to the Reading for Palm Sunday, 28.3.21

Old Testament: Isaiah 50: 4-9a

This passage reflects that of chapter 53, the Suffering Servant theme. We are justified in applying the prophet's words to Jesus. Here he draws his strength from God through his daily prayer and so has the resources to offer help and support to others (vv 4 & 5). He inevitably faces opposition, against which he sets his face 'like flint'(v 7). The suffering this brings was not looked for, but accepted as inevitable, and offered to God. Underlying Jesus's path is a sure hope which carries him through the coming events, a hope which comes from a belief that the future is in God's hands. It is this which helps Jesus endure the pain and suffering of the Cross. All pain and suffering offered to God is redemptive.

Epistle: Philippians 2: 5-11

In the opening verses of this chapter, Paul sets out the way in which we are to live the Christian life, by sharing with, and caring for, each other. There can be no room for selfish ambition or vanity (v3), but we are to seek the best for others than we can. This follows these well-known words of what is thought to be an early Christian song. This sets out the lengths to which Christ has gone in order to win our redemption and his final vindication (v9). At the end, Paul urges us to follow the same path that the gospel may be demonstrated in our lives (vv10 & 11). There is no room in the Christian life for vanity and self-seeking. The example of Christ set out here is our pattern, and we all know how hard it is to walk in that way.

Gospel: a. Mark 11: 1-11

b. Mark 15: 1-39 (40-47)

We have two choices of gospel – one for the Service of the Palms; the other, the Liturgy of the Passion. The first is the account of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. There's a contrast between the entry of Jesus on a donkey and the reactions of the crowds. Many looked for the liberation of Israel from Roman rule; others may have seen this the entry of the Messiah, but still misunderstood what this meant; or yet others may have worried that the status quo would be threatened. The disciples must have felt that this was their moment. Jesus himself clearly knew the way he must go and resolutely continued that way to the end.

This reading of the Liturgy of the Passion from St Mark's gospel starts at the appearance of Jesus before Pilot, having been found guilty of blasphemy by the Jewish Council. The Jewish leaders had to persuade Pilot to condemn Jesus to death, since they were forbidden to do so. Pilot clearly saw through this, but try as he might he could not persuade the authorities to change their mind. All through the events before Pilot, it is Jesus who calmly bears himself amidst the shouts of the crowds and accusations of their leaders and the deepening perplexity of Pilot and the ribaldry of the soldiers. Ever since his appearance before the Chief Priest, Jesus has stood alone, forsaken by his disciples, the crowds, and in the end, even by God (15:34). It is only the women and John who stand by him at the Cross, a glimmer of light in the darkness of those events. (v40 & 41).

