

2024-03-24 ... 10am Sermon for Palm Sunday ... Revd Pippa White

I'd like to start off this sermon with a question:

May I ask you all, on such a poignant day as Palm Sunday, on such a day filled with holy anticipation as Palm Sunday is, do you ever stop and realise, that church is really weird sometimes?

I mean, let's look at all this objectively...

The choir has just walked around the church, to end up exactly where they began.

We're all holding Palm crosses.

I, alongside the choir, are all wearing special costumes.

There's livestock in church.

And soon, we'll all announce that we are eating flesh and drinking blood.

We've got to admit, this is all a bit odd!

Church services, let's face it, are full of ceremony, full of traditions and theatre. What we have, in a word, are rituals. Lots of rituals. And, dare I make a sweeping statement, I think church is one of the few places left in our modern Western society, which still has ritual. I don't think we find it anywhere else much these days.

And, personally, I think it's very important that we keep doing these rituals.

We, as humans, have done rituals for thousands, or, if Google is to be trusted, tens of thousands of years. Clearly, they're very important to us, they scratch an itch in us that nothing else does.

So why do we do them?

Well, the first, and perhaps most obvious answer, is that rituals teach us. Today, we've been taught a history lesson. We, through hearing the story, and at different points re-enacting it, remember that Jesus rode in on a donkey, that people laid palm leaves on the road, and the crowds cried 'hosanna!', which means 'save us!', to the man they thought would be the triumphant king against the Romans who were oppressing them. So, we remember what happened because the story is read to us in the gospel reading, and we re-enact it.

But is that the only reason? Is being taught a history lesson the only reason for all of these costumes and candles and the bread and the wine?

I don't think so.

Because, hear me out, I think all of this is to create a space, create a time, create an atmosphere, where we suspend everything else in our lives. We leave at the door, or, at least we try to leave, the worries about work, wondering what we're going to have for dinner tonight, if the boiler needs a service, or if the car's due an MOT... we leave all of that, and we enter into something else. We enter into another place, physically yes, because we've walked into church, but also mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Everything gets parked, into the back of our minds, while we enter into this ritual. **PTO**

And I think it's important that we do this, that we have this space in our lives when everything is quietened for an hour or so, so that we might enter into a different experience. And, of course, as we enter Holy Week, every day there will be a different experience. Each day, in this week coming, there will be a different service, another experience to be surrounded by, to be immersed in, as we trace Jesus' footsteps to the cross, and beyond.

So, why do we do this? Like I said, yes we're taught, but, to sum up what I've just been talking about, we also do all this so that we might be transformed.

We are, all, right here, right now, hopefully, in a space in our minds and souls where we no longer think about the chores that await us when we get home, but we are thinking about things much bigger than us. When we go through these rituals, I do hope you aren't there trying to understand and to analyse and to dissect, but just allowing yourself to experience.

Just experience - to hear, to touch, to feel, soon to taste.

Allow yourself to join in, to participate, to move and sing and feel.

Because, it is at that point, where you will open yourself to transformation. You will allow yourself to be transformed, and you will allow God to transform you.

Of course, the risk is, when we allow ourselves to be transformed, is that something might happen that we don't see coming. Something might happen, something in us might change, in a way we perhaps don't want.

We will see this in our Holy Week - the crowds who were shouting 'Hosanna! Save us!' to this king they were convinced would be the all-powerful ruler to push out the Romans, will become the crowds shouting 'Save Barabbas!' on Friday. They refused to be transformed, and they completely missed the point, while the son of God was right there in front of them.

But unlike those crowds, we get the chance this year, to get it right. We are given the chance to try again and again and again, to live this experience and go through these rituals again and again and again, until we get it right. Don't forget, our God is patient, our God is kind, and our God knows we're trying.

So, on this Palm Sunday, with all these weird traditions and costumes and rituals, can I ask you, to let yourselves go, and see what God will do with you, over this Holy Week coming?

Amen.