

PALM SUNDAY

10 APRIL 2022

Hebrew Scriptures: Isaiah 50. 4-9a

Epistle: Philippians 2. 5-11

Gospel: Luke 19. 28-40

On a warm Friday afternoon in February of 2003, I caught a train into the city to meet some friends and take a walk down Swanston St – along with 150,000 other people. We were there to protest the looming decision by the Australian government to invade Iraq.

As an aside we might wonder about the rightness of that invasion and the pretext for it as we rage against Russia's behaviour. We might wonder about the hundreds of thousands of deaths and the destruction and disorder of Iraqi society. There were no WMDs but the beat up and the untruths were pretext for us to be involved there. We might wonder about the lies we were told as the Russians are told lies about why their sons are in Ukraine.

Anyway, I waited to meet my friends on the intersection of Swanston and Latrobe in the biggest crowd I think I have been in. All of a sudden there was a cheer and applause and the crowd behind me parted revealing a man wheeling a hand trolley. On the trolley there was a blue 44-gallon drum painted with the letters O-I-L in white. On top of the drum was standing an effigy of George W Bush. Seated beneath him was one of John Howard. The crowd continued to cheer and applaud and make way for this imaginative piece of street theatre. Nothing more needed to be said. We knew the reason for the invasion. We knew we were being told lies. All the speeches were superfluous in many ways.

When I was in primary school, which began for me in I think 1961, we used to gather in the school yard for assembly on Monday morning, face the flag, place our hands on our hearts and say The Oath together:

I love God and my country,
I will honour the flag,
I will serve the Queen
and cheerfully obey my parents, teachers and the law.

In my developing personal and national identity it spoke to me of a kind of compact between myself, being Australian and the sense that the Queen somehow was the embodiment or protector of a social cohesion and a set of values which I was asked to 'cheerfully' subscribe to. God was tied up with all this too, but that's another question. As I have recalled this weekly vow, it has at times felt like a form of social control but, as with all things as we get older, I have mellowed a bit about the intent at the heart of this ritual. For the whole of my life the Queen has continued to embody values which underlie social order and in that world the Oath imagined communal flourishing. She has both dutifully and graciously fulfilled her part of that compact. I have lived through a period of unprecedented stability in this regard and it feels, on reflection, that monarchy – not necessarily the British monarchy – can be a good thing. But when we look at history, this long and stable, dignified and principled reign is really the exception, rather than the

rule. Being a student of Russian history, I know that Putin's practice of leadership and brutal tactics of control have been the rule used by Russian Czars, by Soviet General Secretaries and by Presidents-for-life, alike.

As Jesus enters Jerusalem the crowds cry out:

Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven.

While the republicans among us might think that monarchy and king or queenship is an outmoded and defunct form of leadership, we need to get ourselves and our own political proclivities out of the way when we read this passage. Kingship was the form of leadership that the ancient Jews knew; there was no other option for them to consider. So, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, the crowd gives voice to a longing for a kingly reign which he was embodying. As we watch the destruction and distress in Ukraine we can see how quickly a reign of peaceful flourishing can turn to carnage and destruction with one maniac in control. In a sense we shouldn't over-spiritualise the clamouring for a godly rule that the Jerusalem crowds call for. They were repressed, exploited and brutalised. And Jesus had embodied a new way of being for them. In their cry: *Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven*, they echo the song of the angels to the shepherds. It is, as if, the people Jesus has connected with have heard the angels' song, and now echo it back to heaven. The song of the angels has come to fulfillment in Jesus. He has embodied a reign which is in accord with heaven's heart. No wonder they want him king.

We have mostly been raised to believe that religion should have no part in politics. And politics should never be mentioned from the pulpit. But the truth is that the church has always had a vexed, often conflictual and ambiguous relationship with political power. When Jesus mounts a donkey and makes his way into Jerusalem for this piece of street theatre, he performs a political act, not a party-political act but one, nevertheless, which mobilises people's hopes and longings, their frustrations and pain. The crowd welcomes him as king. What more political affirmation could there be than this?

Indeed, we have been coached to spiritualise the meaning of Easter – Jesus dies so that we can go to a better place has been the story too many have been given. Don't worry about this life. It's really an Elon Musk or Richard Branson take on the world, let's find a better place to live: "good riddance to this one and all those other difficult people." This mindset abandons the political sphere to the sociopaths and bullies and, behind closed doors, passively hopes for a better day. The David and Goliath struggle going on between Ukraine and Russia is resistance by a people who are not willing to abandon the political sphere to the psychopaths. This is why we are in awe of their tenacity, their dignity and creativity in the face of brute evil.

As Jesus makes his bit of street theatre on the donkey, all eyes turn to him and watch as the events of the week unfold; the crowds watch, the religious leaders watch, the political leaders watch, the disciples watch, the women watch.

When we say Jesus frees us, I believe he frees us from the inevitability and the terror of human violence. The resurrection says to the world: violence and abuse is not the last word. For each of us, for us collectively, the political implication of what this lone God-man does is that he offers us,

as Paul writes, a new and living way shaped by an image of God which Jesus was prepared to live into, even to death. As Paul writes to the Philippians:

he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

This is, of course, a political statement about the nature of the world which we envision as disciples of Jesus. We are called to live into this vision which we do with hope and anticipation of the coming kingdom. As we pray in the Lord's Prayer:

For yours is the kingdom,
The power and the glory,
Now, and forever.
Amen

As we prepare to mark Jesus' passion and resurrection, we tell the story of the brutality and injustice of what takes place. It is a story which resonates and exposes all of the stories of brutality and injustice in our own time and points to the darkness which so often overwhelms humanity. But the abandonment of the cross is not the last word. Which brings us to Easter Day. As we hear the story again, sit with it, ponder it and the events of our own time and our own lives, may God bring us to resurrection.

Andrew Boyle