

# Palm Sunday

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 25 March 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Simon Hansford,  
Moderator, Synod of NSW ACT

## Palm Sunday B

Isaiah 50: 4-9; Mark 11: 1-11

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

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I bring you the greetings of the Synod of NSW and the ACT. A welcome especially to our Canadian friends.

I was privileged, during the week, to be at the Stations of the Cross, an installation of artwork that one of our Ministers, Doug Purnell's been curating for several years. It's being held this year out at Northmead Performing Arts High School. If you get a chance to go out there and see it, it's well worth the journey.

It reminded me of another art installation I saw some time ago, which I've heard a lot about since, by an artist called Lee Mingwei. He runs a thing called "*the mending table*" and as part of the installation, he sits there at a table and there's a large array behind him – two or three walls of thousands of different threads on their little spools (are they called spools? Reels?) Thousands of threads all of different colours all around behind him and people can bring pieces of material to be mended – and he will mend the material for you.

But there's a charge upon you: you must sit there and talk to him while he mends and tell him where the material comes from and the story behind the material – so that at the end of the repair, he understands not just what the restoration looks like, but why you've brought it and who you are – and the material always looks slightly altered so that you know that the story is not simply patched up from the past, but marked again for the future. An installation that requires more than just bringing something along, but requires you to bring yourself as well.

When Jesus arrives on Palm Sunday, the beginning of this series of art installations that Jesus engages in over this appalling week, Jesus arrives in this space – and by arriving in this way with this crowd at this time – declares himself.

A colleague of mine from several years ago would talk about this time being "*perfect street theatre*". He knows what he's doing. He's crafting the moment and the day to draw attention precisely to himself. He draws the eye to him and in so doing, as this week begins, this week of wonder and awfulness and wonder; as he draws the eye, he asks people to engage by more than just simply cheering, but as the week draws on.

One of the debates through Sunday School and through later conversations is: “is it prescience on Jesus’ part or is it planning that he knows about this donkey and this person and the ongoing saga?”

### Who cares!

Let the story be the story! Jesus crafting with his disciples, a donkey and a task – and rides into town.

When you read different Gospels, there’s a sense that when Jesus performs miracles and wonder, or teaches certain things or embraces certain people, he then says to them: “*just don’t tell anybody! Don’t say a word!*”

Of course its folly, but he tries that. He tries, as it were, to hold the gospel close to himself for a moment, or longer than a moment – but, suddenly, as we arrive in Jerusalem all the trumpets, as it were, are being blown and Jesus arrives in town.

Is this what they expected? Is this what they wanted? And when you read the story it seems the answer to both is “yes” – and “no”--- like perhaps some recent Prime Ministers – a list that grows longer it seems - people expected or wanted something and it seems we received something entirely other!

You can talk about the prophets’ words about donkeys, but for most of us who have worked with donkeys, they’re funny kinds of animals, a bit cute; and let me tell you, if you’ve ever had to have a donkey in worship on Palm Sunday, it’s an effort!

We tried it once and there was one particular person who was completely opposed and turned up to complain anyway – and the donkey’s stubbornness and persistence down the aisle was stopped for a moment and he – as it were – was lighter a few moments later and, of course, next to the one person who’d protested. A sense of humour, God has!

They’re not easy animals to work with, but as members of my family will tell you, they are quite beautiful.

But when I read this story I have images far more of Sancho Panza riding alongside Don Quixote, or reading Chesterton’s poem “the devil’s walking parody of all four footed things” than I do of majesty and glory and might. I have an image of someone being not quite the thing that we might have imagined the thing to be. The wrong kind of triumph, perhaps, as Jesus is welcomed into town.

This image almost – almost – of the fool.

But when you grasp the image of the fool, Shakespeare pops his head up and suddenly you realise the fool may in fact know a great deal of the story and explains to the audience, confused and unsure, sometimes, what’s actually going on – and hold in their pocket or in their heart or in their words what Shakespeare plans for us or where the characters are heading. Or perhaps even bravely the idiot Dostoyevsky talks about, who because of his innocence and grace and generosity, he’s branded as a fool or an idiot by those around him – when in actual fact, he is the one most Christlike in the story indeed.

Jesus has moved from a whisper to a shout – and some might wonder, like today's Palm Sunday March, later on, for Refugees: whether this is proclamation or protest? And, of course, it's both! Jesus, by what he does and proclaiming who he is says something about Caesar and about Pilate and about the world around him. And about those who choose to follow and those who choose not to. But also about protesting those powers and how they're misused and used in the world around you.

He lays claim by this! He lays claim to a purpose of God.

He looks around, it says, after arrival, at all that there is - and then leaves again.

And in his eye, the temple catches him for a moment, but one can imagine it wasn't just that one moment that the temple caught him for – and his behaviour later on the next day understands a sense of questioning what religion is or what faith is and what the temple is there for and what it calls us to be - and that challenging moment when Jesus seeks to turn things upside down.

But, you see, this is not about a coup d'état. This is not about Jesus wresting control and taking power for himself! This is not the knight riding into town wielding a sword.

This is the one who by action – and almost silliness – this one who, by his actions, proclaims a new story.

A coup d'état solves nothing. You just move the chess pieces around the board.

What Jesus intends in facing a ruptured system, a broken system, is to say patching won't fix this. Tweaking that public servant or that politician, changing that Prime Minister or doing a different thing with the Pope over there won't solve the problem in the slightest.

This is about one who comes to say: *"Only a total transformation; a total re-understanding, a total repentance in that sense that Jesus talks about – not just a turning around, but a total renewal in how one thinks about the world in which we live and to which God calls us. Only this will echo the intention of the living God".*

Immediately, the church responds by saying: *"Fantastic! A new system! How can we manage that? How can we lead in that? How can we design programs and courses and clergy and leadership, lay and ordained, for that?"*

Now what, instead, if we try to understand the depth, the profound depth of a God who invites us to mission and service? To serving and acting and caring and listening and attending in such a way that those who are brushed aside by every system; that those who are regarded as being less worthy by every structure are gathered in by this God. Are gathered in by this Jesus. Who are as welcomed by the whisper and song of God's spirit as anyone in creation.

This prophetic voice of Jesus to Caesar and Pilate, but also to our church; this prophetic voice that invites power to understand itself differently. Like that young lady with the close-cut haircut after the Parkland Massacre, standing at the microphone and inviting this entire gathered community to call "BS" she said, on those things that the government and the structures were saying how they'd fix the gun violence, how they'd attend to it and how they'd send their thoughts and prayers.

Ministry and mission is about service; and there are some of us called in that ministry and mission like Jesus had been called to truth-telling and known into the church and the world around us where discipleship might well take us. What it means for us. And we know that within moments of the palms being waved, of the voices being shouted, of the garments being strewn across the road, that this evening we might celebrate Passion Sunday and mark the journey ahead of Jesus.

Jesus' mission of catching eyes and hearts and turning things upside down, of entering the chaos of empire and religion and culture is that to which we are called.

There is no place for us simply to say: *"Oh, look at what he's doing! What a lovely parade!"*

There is no place for us to say: *"I got a screenshot. Won't that be good! I've posted it and it's got a really nifty hashtag. Palms on Sunday!"*

What does this week declare to us? We are invited to proclaim a God who reframes the story. Who doesn't sit, content, with simply a reboot, but wants us to have the story reframed in such a way that we understand the last being first not as the prize, but as normal.

We want to understand that. We don't just tolerate it, we celebrate it! What does that mean for us?

Sadly, we know - that when we confront power, a politician may well say: *"Well those folk are dead to me!"* We know the consequence of standing up to those in power – and how they might brush us aside or ignore us or even imprison us or worse.

But this week of all weeks reminds us of who we are and to whom we belong.

Perhaps God's sense of humour extends a moment to Ash Wednesday beginning on Valentine's Day and April Fools Day being Easter Day! I mentioned that the other day and one of the older retired Ministers said to me: *"Only a twisted kind of mind would note that!"* and seemed disappointed that he hadn't noted it first.

What does it mean for us to be walking such a journey? That the day which we would say changes everything is the day named for fools!

When we bring ourselves to God's mending table. What story shall we tell? What marks shall we bear?

And what life shall we lead as a consequence?

Amen.