

Reflection for Palm Sunday

Never the same again was a radio 4 series that ran during the 1980's and 1990's. It told the stories of those whose lives had undergone a significant change. In some programmes it broke new ground, as it dealt with personal issues which had received very little public attention previously. Life changing events happen all the time and there will be many life changing stories to listen to over the coming months – some of those will be our own. I hope people find a good listening ear. We can hope and pray, that whilst they will contain great difficulties, they will not all have a bad outcome. After all, life goes on even in a pandemic. For example, I am sure young people will still meet, fall in love, and plan a future together – even if they must remain two metres apart! Each year the marking of Holy Week invites us to encounter a love that should mean we are all never the same again. That's the possibility of Holy Week, the invitation of Holy Week, that God can continue the change in us that was first begun when we heard about Jesus and accepted him as Lord and Saviour.

The message of Lent is often a simple one. That although Lent is **our** preparation for the celebration of Easter, paradoxically Lent 'tells' us that it is not about **us**. Often something happens in Lent that upsets our plans or throws us of course in some way. Clearly, this year has been no exception. Collectively we have been dumped in a place we would rather not be. I am not saying our current situation has been sent by God, far from it, this is a natural event – viruses occur. But it has been a decentring experience. It makes me think of Jesus' words to Simon Peter on the shore of Tiberias: *I tell you most solemnly, when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go.*¹ We will not be the same again after this and no amount of pretending otherwise will change that – the belt of lockdown has us firmly in its grasp! Probably just as well for the time being. So, in a way nobody would want, the unintended consequence is this: might we be entering Holy Week in a more open way than usual?

We need God's presence and love at this moment more than ever. But we can't do some of the usual things we do to enter this love. The churches are closed, gatherings of people are severely restricted and so on. Usually we stand together with Palms in our hands and welcome Jesus into our lives, and then in listening to the Passion realise that it is he who is welcoming us into his sacrifice on the Cross. We get decentred quite quickly, something has gone wrong, one-minute cheering and waving, the next with Jesus in his passion and death. This week Jesus is welcoming us and asks us to contemplate his sacrificial love for us all. This could be the moment of change, the moment when we stop thinking about ourselves and think about him. God's love in Jesus can touch our minds and hearts in a way that overcomes distance, absence and loneliness. It comes through the Church, but it can reach you wherever you are. It has the power to change everything but does not itself change. As we will see next Sunday it was an event in history but is everlasting.

Never the same again? After contemplating again God's love, let's hope so.

¹ John 21:18