

Palm Sunday 2022

I spent the last week of March in London at a meeting of the Primates of the worldwide Anglican communion. It wasn't a meeting of animals who swing through trees, but the senior bishops from each region of the Anglican church. One of my roles is the primate of Australia.

The meeting ended on March 31st, and I was flying home on April the first and I had an evening flight, so I had the whole day to fill in. I decided to visit the Imperial war museum, just down the road from where I was staying. Among the displays is a gallery devoted to the holocaust, and as you can imagine it was pretty confronting.

What was significant for me was not just the murder of so many Jewish people by the Germans, but the process that led up to what was called the 'final solution to the Jewish question'. Over the years leading up to world war 2 life was made harder and harder for Jews in Germany. They were treated badly and very unjustly to try to make them leave Germany and of course those who could did. They were excluded, freedoms taken away, business boycotted and looted.

What really made me think was the obvious involvement in this by so many ordinary Germans. The German leaders, Hitler and his cronies shaped this evil, but lots of otherwise ordinary Germans participated in this terrible injustice either actively or by their silence. And I have some understanding why.

Many were afraid for their own family. Many got caught up in the fever of trying to make Germany great again after the disaster of World War 1. I get that, but even given that, bad things were done, not by terrible people, but ordinary Germans who got caught up in the evil of Nazi Germany.

I was thinking about that as I thought about today, Palm Sunday.

Today is a day of contrasts. A contrast between the beginning of the week and end of the week. Both ends of the week involve crowds.

In the reading at the beginning of the service we heard about the crowds of Jesus disciples who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem. They were overwhelmingly positive. Yelling out-hosanna. Here is our king. Our king saves. And they put branches on the road for Jesus to ride over-the Jerusalem version of the red carpet.

And then were heard the reading of the passion, when at the end of the week the crowd was still yelling, but their message had changed. They weren't yelling 'hosanna' any more, they were yelling 'crucify him'. Get rid of him. We don't want him.

That was a terrible thing to do. Demanding the death of Jesus, an innocent man. How could those people do that and say that of Jesus, a completely good man who had done so much good. And even the disciples, Jesus' friends, those who had been with him for so long and seen how good he was and how godly he was and many of them had experienced personally his love and his healing. How could they abandon him? How could Peter, the disciple closest to Jesus repeat three times that he wasn't a follower of Jesus and didn't even know him.

You could call the crowd fickle. From hosanna to crucify him in just a few days. But maybe we are all a bit like that. Maybe we haven't demanded someone's death but maybe we all have within us much that is good and some bad as well. Maybe we could get caught up in the crowd just as the ordinary people did in Jerusalem and the ordinary people did in Nazi Germany.

Perhaps we shrink in horror at that suggestion, but the reality is that all of us are a mix of good and bad. Circumstances can really influence all of us. None of us is perfect, and if we are not perfect we don't have a leg to stand on. There is no hierarchy of sin as far as God is concerned.

As I thought about this there are some implications for us, I think.

First, we need to be slow to judge others for the bad or the failure we see in them. TV shows like a current affair try to make viewers feel morally superior by endlessly showing stories about loan sharks and shonky operators but none of us have any right to feel superior to anyone. We need to understand what makes people tick and why they might do what they do and its rarely as simple as we think. But the bottom line is that all of us is a mix of saint and sinner.

Second, we need to accept the forgiveness we have in Christ.

None of us is perfect. All of us fall short of the glory of God. We deserve judgement from God who is perfect, but in Jesus Christ we have forgiveness not because we deserve forgiveness, but because of the grace and mercy of God. That's important for us to remember as we think of other people, but also important to remember as we think of ourselves.

Sometimes the reality of our sinfulness and the experience of our failure can be a great burden to us. Its right to take those failures, in terms of the things we have done or not done seriously, because God does, so seriously that Jesus died for us on the cross. It is right to take our sin seriously but also to remember that Jesus died for us on the cross, and accept our forgiveness as well.

Nothing is beyond Gods forgiveness, so its important that we embrace that forgiveness.

Third, we hear and follow Jesus example of humility. In the reading today from the letter to the Philippians we heard this: let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Jesus was humble. He gave himself for us. Paul encourages the Christians of Philippi to have the same mind. Be like Christ in their thinking. Christ sought to serve and that's our calling too.

Fourth, we shape a church marked by grace. Bringing the knowledge of our own sinfulness, plus the experience of forgiveness and the call to humility in the style of Jesus and we will contribute to the shaping of a grace filled church. Which in our current world would be a wonderful gift. This is not to ignore wrong or excuse it. This is to realise that there is good and bad in all people. Circumstances can affect us more than we can guess. None of us is perfect. All of us are loved by God and forgiven by Gods grace in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are beneficiaries of Gods grace and so we offer it to each other.

The people in Jerusalem who we saw at the gates of the city this morning are just like you and me. The people we will see later in the week calling 'crucify him' are just like you and me. We can stand before God because of the events of next weekend. There is no room for pride or arrogance there. Just grateful thanks for Gods grace shown to us who don't deserve it.

As we prepare for this very holy week, lets do that mindful of God grace. Grateful for Gods grace, and determined to pass Gods grace on to others who are just like us.
Amen.