

Palm Sunday, 5th April 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

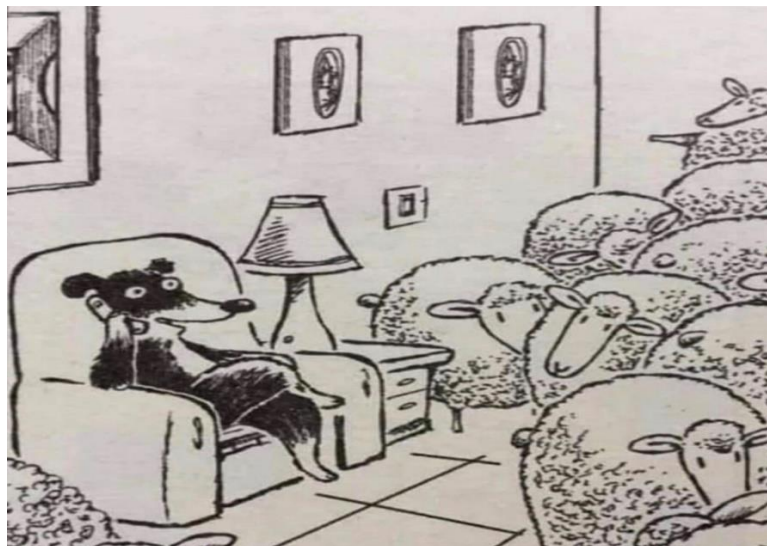
'I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.'

(John 10:11)

Spring is in the air! All around us there are signs of new life: blossom on trees, colourful flowers. Even the very real threat of Coronavirus spreading all across the globe cannot quell the unstoppable signs that tell us Good Things are to come after the long, dark, cold winter. For Christians, Palm Sunday is the biggest sign of Good Things to come.

As he reflects on the impact of Coronavirus and what it might *really* be teaching us, Bill Gates points out the many positive ways our society is responding. COVID-19 is a great equaliser – the virus affects us all, regardless of our culture, religion, occupation, financial situation or how famous we are. It reminds us how precious our health is; and that we *need* each other. The virus mirrors back to us how materialistic our society has become. It jolts us into re-appraising what is precious (food, water, medicine) and what is superficial (the luxuries we selfishly give value to). We are rediscovering how important our family and neighbours are; and how our *true* work is to look after each other, to protect and to be of benefit to one another. This global catastrophe is proving to be a time of great creativity and connection as we learn new ways to relate to the other in and through the love and hope of Christ in this strange new pattern of being.

'Yes, I'm working from home today!'



This WhatsApp image really tickled me earlier in the week. I hope it amuses you too? As I cut and paste it here, I realise my Coronavirus Newsletters seem to be developing a bit of a sheep theme – with those beautiful spring lambs, *Faith, Hope and Charity* last week reminding us of the glory of God's creation, of which we are a vital part in these three gifts. This week, we find the Good Shepherd preparing to die for love of

us. This cartoon brings Palm Sunday right into our current experience – that Jesus would keep His flock right by His side despite the trials He was about to face!

Palm Sunday heralds the first day of Holy Week, the most sacred of our Christian year, when we remember the last week of Jesus' life. Throughout this Lent, with our churches closed, and life as we know it disrupted beyond comprehension, we have had time in isolation to reflect for ourselves on what is important. The world into which Jesus was born reflected situations we see across the world today. Violence and oppression continue to dominate the lives of the innocent and weak. Today, as we remember Jesus, the King of Peace, coming to Jerusalem on a donkey, He challenges us to join Him in living out His radical love for all.

'Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' (Mark 11: 9-10)

On that first Palm Sunday, Jerusalem was in party mood. It was the feast of the Jewish Passover, when God called Moses to free His people from slavery in Egypt. Jesus knew His time had come. God was calling Jesus to save His people from sin, just like God had called Moses to save *his* people from slavery. Jesus knew He had to die so that He could set us all free. That morning, when the whole of Jerusalem was getting ready to party... Jesus was beginning His journey to the Cross.

Jesus entered Jerusalem from the East across the Kidron Valley and the Mount of Olives – the poor end of town. On the other side of Jerusalem, the rich and powerful Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, was also coming into the City – to the impressive Antonia Fortress overlooking Solomon's Temple, from his palace by the sea at Caesarea. He arrived with a great show of power with soldiers in full military uniform, riding magnificent war horses. Jesus' humble entry on a donkey was provocative – to those who knew their scriptures, He was casting Himself in the role of the Messiah and to those who knew their law, He was provoking a riot! His confrontational arrival in Jerusalem on a humble donkey showed the Roman armies who was REALLY in power! The military might of the Roman Empire was no match for the King of Peace.

The crowd following Jesus were close friends and believers who had seen the miraculous things He had done in people's lives. They went WILD, shouting: ***'God bless the King who comes in the name of the Lord,'*** (Luke 19: 38) and waving palm branches before Him as a sign of honour. They were desperate to be saved from Roman tyranny. Yet these people could not fully comprehend that Jesus had come to set them free for *eternity*, not just in the moment. In our time, however, we know better. We know the power and hope of the resurrected Christ!

The King of Peace challenges our modern world to change its self-seeking behaviours - not just as Bill Gates has seen us doing for the duration of the Coronavirus pandemic, but *forever*. Our choice is to *'Follow Him,'* to demonstrate God's self-giving love to the needy and disenfranchised of our world, to act against poverty and hunger, injustice and oppression. The scourge of Coronavirus is a profound opportunity for the whole world to see the inequalities between those who have money and power and those

who currently suffer under the weight of entitlement and greed. Jesus asks us to live out our faith in and through His radical love to bring the light of His hope to everyone.

Yet as much as Palm Sunday challenges us to collective action in bringing Jesus' hope to the world, so its message brings us the personal reassurance we need in the midst of the turmoil and fear we are all holding in the face of COVID-19. In these situations, when we are faced with the stark reality of our own mortality, or of those we love beyond words, that which is important hovers into clear focus. Our hearts distil all these important experiences, memories and feelings into one word: love.

In these times of uncertainty, illness and grief, it is love that will hold us together, calm our fears, give us strength and bring us hope. And the greatest love of all is the eternal and unconditional love of God. Jesus brings us the full power of His love as He journeys to the Cross to set us free from the tragedy of our earthly lives.

This Palm Sunday, despite our muddled, clumsy, inconsistent faith we have good reason to celebrate, even though we face the prospect of what is to come on Good Friday. So open your hearts to receive Jesus' gift of New Life in Him. Have the courage to let His love change your life, free you from anxiety and allow the Holy Spirit to fill you with a peace which passes all understanding. For beyond these present trials, we are blessed with the grace of a loving Father who comes to us in His Son, the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep and keeps us close - even to the end of time.

Let's be joyful and wave our virtual palm crosses to tell out the Good News that, even in the turmoil of Coronavirus, the King of Peace is coming to save us all!

With my love in the Passion of Christ,

Jax

Revd Jax Machin, Rector, The Downs Benefice

Collect Prayer for Palm Sunday:

Almighty and everlasting God, who in your tender love towards the human race sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross:

Grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.