

Sunday 28 March, 2021

A sermon preached by the Ven. Canon Heather Patacca, at St Paul's Cathedral for Palm Sunday 2021.

Readings: Isaiah 50.4-9a, Ps 31.9-18, Philippians 2.5-11, Mark 11.1-11

At the beginning of the film *Star Wars*, and I'm specifically referring here to the 1977 classic, the one released when many of us here were in our heyday, there is a long screed of text, in bright yellow writing, that rolls up from the bottom of the screen as the film begins, disappearing into the dark distance of space. It's called the opening crawl, and back in the 1970s when *Star Wars* came out was hardly a new device in film. The first films depended on slides of text to fill in the necessary details for the audience to follow the plot of silent films. In *Star Wars* – I think they start each film in the franchise with this, not that I have seen all of them – the crawl is used to set the scene so you can put into a bigger context what is going on, so you can interpret the action and dialogue and sudden appearance and comments of characters who are suddenly part of the film. That yellow text has become a much-copied font and a signature of the films, and puts in context the framework that enables us to see connections between characters and events that the characters in the film don't even realise themselves. That Luke and Princess Leah are brother and sister, that Darth Vader is Luke's father.

The context surrounding our view of what is going on is instrumental not just in our appreciation of films, but also in life, in our homes, work places, community, and certainly our life together as God's people, the body of Christ. At present, through the news and social media, we are regularly having insights into the way our and other people's lives are interconnected by virtue of being residents of the same culture, the same city, similar workplaces, having a shared history as decedents of those who have grievously injured others and those who were injured, and by virtue of being infected by the same virus. Our context and, more broadly, our world view, are the key things that determine our understanding and our view of what goes on around us in life. They provide a framework through which we see the world.

Psalm 31

God's view is somewhat different to ours! That is clearly demonstrated in the verses we heard from Psalm 31 today. It begins with the psalmist writhing inwardly in torment, surrounded by threat, derision, and scorn, and pleading for God's mercy:

- 10b my strength fails me in my affliction,
and my bones are consumed.
- 11 I am become the scorn of all my enemies:
and my neighbours wag their heads in derision.

- 9 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble:
my eye wastes away for grief

That's his own experience and view of his situation. Yet that is not the place God views him from, and on this the Psalmist bases his prayer:

- 16 But in you, Lord, have I put my trust:
I have said 'You are my God.'
- 17 All my days are in your hand:
O deliver me from the power of my enemies
and from my persecutors.
- 18 Make your face to shine upon your servant:
and save me for your mercy's sake.

The psalmist's appeal is on the basis of God's view: that he is the God who saves (v18b: and save me for your mercy's sake), the God who calls us to be obedient to him despite opposition we might face, (v18a: Make your face to shine upon your servant:) and the God who is Lord of all, even time and space, and so we can appeal to him for help (v17a: All my days are in your hand).

That juxtaposition of God's perspective and ours, and the follow-on effect on our lives that knowing God's view is different to ours, is a dual thread woven through our readings today, and provides the theme of this our last sermon in our Words to live by series. Today we think about *words to navigate and view the world by*. Let's look together at the reading from Isaiah.

Isaiah 50.4-9a

These verses we read from Isaiah 50 today include the third of what are called the servant songs. Isaiah here further describes a particular servant of God, one through whom God's rebellious and hard hearted people will be saved, redeemed. That servant is often referred to as the suffering servant, and today's reading makes clear the difficulty and push back he will experience, describing the violence used against him even as he goes about the work he is called to do by the Lord, the one he faithfully serves. As we begin this passage from Isaiah, there is a question that has been left hanging immediately before-hand which our passage addresses. The people of Israel are estranged from God. God's people are in exile. So given that Isaiah has established in

previous chapters that the sovereign Lord has the power and the will to deliver his people, **how will he do it?** The answer is here: he will deliver them through the obedience of his servant, even though the servant will have to suffer to enable their deliverance.

The servant will speak God's words:

⁴ The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he awakens—
awakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.

⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.

But despite the **attentive obedience** of the servant, he is abused because of the message declared by him,

⁶ I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

But the servant is willing to bear it because God will vindicate him in the end: he has God's long view:

⁷ The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

⁸ he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?

Let them confront me.

⁹ It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?

Insults and injury might be consistently and painfully thrown his way, but no one will successfully accuse the servant of disobeying God or falsifying the important message he brings, despite the beating and pulling out the beard. He is set on obedience; his face is set like flint to do the Lord's will. **It is not pleasant for the servant to be obedient to God.** Attached to the servant's suffering there is a determination to not be swayed from God's view of what is necessary to be done.

Those of us who are familiar with the Bible will read Isaiah's words and hear the parallels to what Jesus suffered in his earthly ministry. There are uncanny echoes in these words of the life and experience of the one sent by God to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is near. Indeed, Jesus is that very suffering servant through whom God opened the way for reconciliation with his people, and more besides. We might expect obedience to lead to our going well in life, perhaps a little like when we were at school and if you did what the teachers told you your life was a good deal easier than if you didn't. Yet his obedience involved not only suffering but knowing that he would suffer, and remaining obedient anyhow, even to death on a cross.

Philippians 2.5-11 - On a clear day you can see for miles – the real view of what is going on from God's perspective

No doubt at some time in life you have had the wonderful experience of being in a house set high on a hill or mountain, and through the windows been able to see for miles, with the landscape or perhaps seascape laid out before you like an enormous patchwork blanket. In our reading from Philippians, the curtains are drawn right back so that we see God's clear view through time and space view of what was happening through Jesus:

, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

his **willing emptying** of himself to be born human, his **further lowering** of himself to die on the cross, his suffering not just crucifixion but death itself. And further to that we read:

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Rising to new life, Jesus returns to his heavenly Father's side, and is set over all things in heaven and earth.

So here, if you like, is the bright yellow text that in a short few paragraphs gives the context and background of what is going on in the universe, the context of what Jesus is doing, the effect of the willing suffering of the servant, who despite appearances was not a victim of circumstances beyond his control, but deliberately working a realignment with eternal impact for our sakes.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
Paul writes. We are exhorted to have the same mind as was in Christ Jesus, the same view, a deep commitment to obedience to God, a deep relationship of prayer and love, a deep commitment to these things, despite knowing that obedience to God in our context can lead to suffering.

Mark 11.1-11

I described before the experience of viewing a wonderful vista from a window in a house high on a hill. Perhaps in the same way that when you stand close to a window to look out at the view on a sunny day, as if you focus on the glass you can see there a faint reflection of yourself, as you look at the view here you might see yourself here too. Friends, we are heading into the week when we remember the days leading to Jesus' greatest test of obedience, his crucifixion, and particularly today being Palm Sunday, we remember the procession leading him into Jerusalem for the last time in his earthly ministry, with the disquieting juxtaposition of crowds on one hand acclaiming him, and on the other crowds calling for his blood, bookending the week. The view of what is going on for the various players in the story are all different: the disciples accompanying Jesus, surely thinking him mad for going to the place where his life was in danger,

10.32 They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him,

but also buoyed by the reception of Jesus by the crowds,

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’,

and the donkey colt being exactly where it was and their being permitted to take it as Jesus said they would be,

‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

Those bystanders that challenged the disciples, wondering who this pair thought they were helping themselves to a donkey colt that wasn’t theirs to take; the crowds joining the procession and making a carpet of the cloaks off their back and tree branches for Jesus to ride along, shouting,

‘Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Others watching on from the side; those in the temple who saw Jesus and the disciples conduct a ‘reccy’ around the temple and its precinct on their arrival in Jerusalem; and of course, Jesus himself.

¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Through the death a resurrection of Jesus we are invited to be reconciled with God, to know him deeply, to live with a different view. It is a view that is not centred on ourselves, but on what God is doing in his world. And it is a view that acknowledges the invitation we each have to privileged responsibility as his people, as his children, as the body of Christ in the here and now.