

Palm Sunday

Sermon Text – Philippians 2:5-11

Theme: “*The form of a servant*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Today is celebrated as Palm Sunday and it also celebrated as Passion Sunday and in that sense ‘Passion’ means the sufferings of Jesus which happened this during this coming week, nearly 2,000 years ago. I travelled down to Ingham yesterday and we held a service as a congregation called and gathered by the Holy Spirit to give thanks to God for his grace and mercy as he has led his people of Ingham through the recent flooding. As we remembered the effect the rains have had on Ingham, Abergowrie and other local communities, we remembered that we have a saviour who doesn’t ‘click his fingers’ to solve our problems, but who dropped his divinity to be with us in the midst of our suffering. Whether dealing with floods in Ingham, cyclones in Innisfail, or recessions in Cairns, God remains at your side.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The story of Jesus’ triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem is one of great contrast. The people of ancient Israel welcomed Jesus into the city with such fanfare and honour because they thought their hero had finally arrived. Jesus was to be the new messiah, the one who would rescue his people and deliver them from slavery once more. They expected Jesus to keep producing great miracles and the greatest miracle would be the overturning of the Roman rule they had been subjected to.

St. Paul wrote to the Philippians and his words remind today’s culture that values the self-promoting hero, that Jesus chose to be a suffering servant. He could have remained as He was before the Creation of the world: the glorious Son of God who had no flesh and no sufferings. There are probably many ways God could have fixed the broken relationship between himself and humanity, but he chose to send Jesus in the form of a servant. He chose weakness, pain, and death which is what we experience in our lives.

That is where the difficulty lies for many people. As the Lenten season draws to a close, we are approaching the day when God died. The cross is difficult and offensive because there Jesus, who is God, laid down His life. God by nature cannot die because He is eternal and immortal. Nor *should* God die, because He is everything good and pure and loving and beautiful. The death of Christ is the death of God, and humanity does not want to face up to that terrible reality.

Some people try to decrease the offense of the Cross by saying that Jesus didn’t truly suffer on the Cross. He only seemed to suffer. Others have said that Jesus was truly Man, but He was not truly God, and therefore God Himself did not die on the Cross.

But against all those false views of Christ, St. Paul declares that Christ Jesus was in the form of God. He fully possessed all the majesty and holiness of the true God. He had all the power and knowledge and immortality of God.

But Jesus didn’t put himself up on a pedestal. He took the form of a servant by ceasing to use His powers as God. This is not to say that Jesus only appeared to be a Man, as if it was an illusion. Jesus was really and truly a human being, like us in every way *except sin*. And while Jesus did not sin during His life, in His death He became sin for us. That is the purpose of this Passion of Christ. He became in the form of a servant so that He could die a servant's death, to pay for the sins of the world.

For Christ never ceased to be God, not even on the Cross. But He didn’t use His full powers as God while He was on earth. Sometimes, Jesus was tired or hungry or thirsty, even though God by nature is never tired or hungry or thirsty. And we know that God does not bleed. God does not suffer. God does not die. But Christ, who is true God and true Man, bled and died for you, because He took the form of a servant.

When His flesh suffered and died, it was the flesh of God's Son. The flesh of a sinner would achieve nothing. The death of an ordinary person such as you or me would mean little to the world. But Christ Jesus laid down the flesh and blood of God on the cross, and so His death is everything. The cross, the suffering and death of God incarnate, Jesus Christ, rises up over every event in history.

On the cross, Jesus claimed solidarity and unity with sinful humanity. He willingly made Himself one of us, even though He was holy and sinless, unlike us. Jesus had lived among us for about thirty years. He was one of us, even though His divinity was unimaginably far above us. On the cross, Jesus embraced all people, so that all of our sins and the weight of our guilt fell upon Him. This form of a servant is the form of Christ upon the cross.

He came in humility to serve us by carrying the heavy burdens that belonged to us: the burdens of our sin, our death, and our damnation even those these burdens were not His to carry. He did not need to suffer. *He chose to suffer*. Christ Jesus, the only Man who could choose not to die, chose the worst death possible, to save us.

On Palm Sunday He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, when He could have ridden upon the backs of mighty angels. That is the humility of Christ. That day He allowed Himself to be so weak that the Disciples had to lift Him up onto the donkey. That is the form of a servant. Jesus rides into Jerusalem to present Himself to God as the sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world. He lowers Himself to the level of a lamb whose only purpose is to be slaughtered. That is the form of a servant.

At the same time that He rides into Jerusalem to die, His mighty power is also upholding Creation. At the same time that He suffers at the hands of sinful men, Jesus is also preserving their lives and the lives of all living creatures. At the same time that nails and thorns are driven into His holy flesh, the Son of God is also keeping the universe from collapsing into chaos. The lowly Son of Man who looks like nothing but a pathetic, dying carpenter's son, is actually the great God who protects and defends the world even when that world turns upon Him and kills Him. That is the form of a servant.

And it is this servant who stands with you in humility when you endure the challenges of life which are whatever the circumstances you may find yourself in. Several weeks ago, it happened to be flooding rains. In Victoria it was burning fires. Across much of Australia it remains terrible drought. But also it is Jesus Christ who serves you as individuals, not just as communities. Some people here today will be suffering terrible hardships. I don't know what they all are and it's quite likely that many of you won't know, and yet God knows – and Jesus serves you by standing with you. Whatever your circumstances may be, remember Jesus' invitation to all who are weary and heavy laden, "Come to me and I will give you rest."

Right now, Christ remains a Man, and also remains God. That is how He will be forever. But He is no longer in the form of a servant. Now He is highly exalted. Now saints and angels in heaven bow before the glorious Son of God, who shines before them in the unveiled form of God.

Even now, we on earth join in and copy those above. Many saints here below bow their knee at His presence when He comes in bread and wine. Many bow our heads at the Name "Jesus" in our worship. For this is the Name of the Lord of life and death who conquered sin and Satan. This is the Name of the Lord who freed you and me from our own death, by dying Himself. One day, all knees will bow, and all tongues confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, whether they like it or not. Even Satan's black tongue will be forced to confess that Jesus is Lord.

So all creation praises this Lord and confesses His Name, because He has suffered on your behalf. He has died in your place. He took the form of a servant so that He who is God in human flesh could lay down His life on the Cross for you. With heaven and earth, we give glory to His great Name which is above every Name: Christ Jesus, Lord and God.

And may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.