

Sermon on Palm Sunday, 24 March 2024

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Philippians 2. 1-11 & Mark 11. 1-10



The Freedom of Surrender

It's said that at least 11% of all Americans claim Irish ancestry; that's 34.4 million more than Ireland itself! Last Sunday (17 March), hair, beer, even rivers, were dyed green across the world in honour of the patron saint of the Emerald Isle.

Of all the world's patron saints, Patrick seems to be the most widely celebrated. That's probably due in part to the great Irish diaspora, but it's also probably something to do with the craic; the good times washed down by a pint or six of the black stuff.

Human beings love an excuse for a celebration, but before we look at the celebrations of that first Palm Sunday, I'd like first to explore a little bit of the life of St Patrick. Much of his story, of course, is enshrined in myth and legend, but what we do know is

that he was born in Britain to Roman parents sometime around 385 AD. Aged 16, he was kidnapped by pirates and trafficked to Ireland where for six years he lived as a slave.

Eventually, he escaped his captors and returned to England where he was ordained a priest. Later, Patrick would have that famous vision in which he heard the voice of the Irish people, 'We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us'. And that is, of course, eventually what he did; he chose to go back to the place of his trauma; back to the people who had enslaved him.

Although his ministry among the Irish was extremely fruitful, he was nevertheless always an outsider. By refusing to obey or align himself with kings and clans he was legally without protection and often suffered beatings and imprisonment because of it.

There are obvious parallels here with the life of Jesus. A moment came when he, too, felt the call back to the stronghold of his enemies. Previously, Jesus had scandalised the religious ruling classes in Jerusalem by daring to re-draw the boundaries of God's acceptance.

We're told that he set his face towards the Holy City full-knowing that this would be the place of his betrayal and humiliation, his torture and his death.

And then, as if to further provoke his opponents, he orchestrates this big entrance acting out Zechariah's prophecy which foresaw

the Messiah, the Chosen One, riding into town on the back of a donkey.

In the background there was also, of course, the brutal Roman occupation which was especially twitchy at this festival time of year when the city became a tinderbox of potential rioting and dissent.

So, this little procession with its make-shift red carpet of coats and branch waving pilgrims would not go unnoticed. This 'Pretender' of a Messiah was signing his death warrant. Both Patrick and Jesus bravely, or stupidly, returned to the place of their nemesis.

We all have, I imagine, similar places in our lives, memories still raw, people we've hurt or been hurt by; unresolved conflict or trauma. And, invariably, at different times they bite and devour and nurture a bitterness within us.

Usually, the only way to heal these places within is to return to them; revisit the pain. But not alone. In the company of Christ, and, if need be, the professionals, we dare to face our past in order to disable its power, and perhaps to even befriend and make peace with what's happened; to be free of its hold.

Even when Jesus was arrested, he remained the freest man who has ever lived; that, I guess, is what made him both so attractive and so repellent. He knew who he was; he didn't need the

validation of others; he lived truthfully and that can, of course, be threatening.

His freedom, however, wasn't built on his own autonomy, his own power or control. Nor did it come from the approval of others. His freedom came from making God his centre.

You see, our culture has sold us a lie; we've been told that freedom is about having our own way, being independent, self-sufficient. But true freedom only happens when God is at the centre of things; the compass, the ballast, the authority of our lives. That's how we humans were designed. As one Belfast hymn-writer puts it, 'It's only in your will (God), that I am free'.

Ironically, it's only when we surrender our wills, our ambitions, our need to control, our autonomy, that we begin to find that balance, that connectedness, that freedom we all crave. When we discover what God thinks of us, we don't need to search out affirmation from other people and other things.

That beautiful early hymn we read a few moments ago from Philippians talks about a time coming when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. It's not, I believe, some future enforced submission, instead it's a moment when the whole of humanity wakes up to the fact that this is what we were made for; we were made to surrender to God; to call him our Lord. Because, if we don't make him our Master then we can be sure that something else will fight for and claim our allegiance.

On the whole, we humans don't often make good masters; our egos are too volatile, we're too insecure. Jesus, however, as the hymn reminds us, 'made himself nothing, took on the nature of a servant' – this Lord is the embodiment of humility, the model of self-sacrifice, because he's secure in God's love.

You know, I used to struggle a bit with the idea of God demanding our worship; 'Why does He need it? Is it some grand cosmic ego-trip?' And, of course, the answer is he doesn't need it; worship isn't about God's ego or making him like us more; He doesn't need our worship, we do. We need to worship God because if we don't, we'll worship something else; something that belittles us, something that dehumanises us. It's only when we place God at the centre that everything else in our lives falls into place. We find that equilibrium; that perspective and intimacy, the power we need to become more of who we were created to be.

That ancient song begins, 'May our attitude be like that of Christ'... who made himself nothing; who went back to his enemies to show them what the power of love and forgiveness can do; who surrendered his ego in order to find himself; who teaches us how to live, how to die and how to be free.

As, centuries ago, the Irish implored Patrick to come and walk with them, today may we invite Christ to walk with us, as friend and as Lord. May we invite him into the decisions of our lives, listening to how he directs us through our instincts and passions, through scripture and the counsel of others. May we submit our dreams and fears; our past and our present and our future into

his secure hands and receive from him that greatest of gifts... our freedom.