

THE MAN OF SURPRISES

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On this third Sunday of Lent, we have travelled some way on our Pilgrimage to the Cross. This blessed period of Lent affords us the time to contemplate the actions of Jesus and those around him as they walked steadfastly towards whatever waited for them in Jerusalem.

I would urge each one of you to think of this time as a pilgrimage, a time to rediscover the essence of the Christian faith. This central theme is the belief in God's gift to the world of God's son Jesus, who not only lived among us but was crucified and was raised from the dead. Either this series of events 2000 years ago was so or we are all living under an illusion. There really is no in between – truth or fiction, one or the other.

It helps us to explore and to understand the actions of Jesus and those around him in the weeks leading up to the crucifixion and resurrection. By travelling with the disciples and the followers of Jesus we rediscover the power of the story and its implications for our life and faith.

Enclosed in the bulletin this morning is the outline of our Easter events. Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday when Jesus deliberately entered Jerusalem and received the adulation of the crowds. We will enact with the children the excitement of that day as we process into the city together waving our palm branches and shouting Hosanna!

Wednesday and Thursday of Holy Week we will hold joint noon hour services with lunch here and at Christ Church down the hill. Maundy Thursday evening, you are invited to re-enact Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet and the Last Supper of our Lord with his followers. Good Friday we will walk from our church to Bridge Street Church carrying the cross through the city. Together as congregations we will solemnly remember Christ's miserable death so undeserved and brutal. Easter Sunday we shout for joy as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and his appearance to Mary Magdeleine and the apostles.

Along the way of our pilgrimage to the cross, we will reexamine for ourselves who this man Jesus was and what he taught us as we walk together towards Jerusalem.

When I think of the ministry of Jesus for the three years he wandered throughout the Holy Land, I think of a man who was full of surprises. People from all walks of life were astounded by his wisdom and knowledge. Religious and secular leaders tried to trip him up and get him to condemn himself but they never succeeded. Jesus' responses to their trickery acted as a mirror in which they saw themselves for who they were and for the deviousness they exhibited.

Isaiah in our reading today, has God speaking to the faithful about their inability to fully grasp all that God was and is. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways

my ways” declares the Lord, “for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

In short God is stating an easy to understand truth – we can never as men and women fully grasp all there is to God. “Seek the Lord while he may be found” states Isaiah, “call on him while he is near.” It is enough to know that God is ever present at our side.

The disciples who followed Jesus for three years saw in Jesus a man of surprises. It was never possible to fully describe Jesus, nor easy to contain all he was in mere words. They experienced him; they watched him in action; they sat and talked with him; they listened to countless sermons; they watched numerous healings; they witnessed the numerous miracles when people were made whole again. However, even then, they could not fully grasp the significance of who he was.

We read today Mark’s story of Jesus and the crippled man. This incident contains so many moments of truth to the many characters in the story including the disciples.

Jesus was teaching in a home which was naturally jammed with people eagerly listening to his every word. It would have been very warm and perhaps even stuffy with so many in such a confined space.

Outside, the crowds staid to hear what Jesus was saying in the house. Along came four men each holding a corner of a mattress on which was laying their crippled friend. They brought him there out of their love for their friend and genuine concern for his condition hoping to see Jesus and have their friend healed.

Most people in these circumstances seeing the crowds would have turned and gone home. The friend on the mattress was no doubt disappointed but would have urged his friends to go back to his home without seeing Jesus.

We are not giving up, said his friends, we will find a way to get to Jesus! Just hang on as we climb the stairs to the roof of the house. They climbed up the stairs, pulled apart the reed platform and exposed the crowd below listening to Jesus. Then with ropes they lowered their friend’s mattress down and the crowd had to move to accommodate him. Can you not image the surprise of the group and their annoyance with the disturbance? All eyes looked to Jesus to ascertain how he felt about this intrusion!

Jesus looked up and saw the four faces of the men who had brought their friend to his very feet. Mark the writer makes this very interesting statement: “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, Son, your sins are forgiven.” Jesus had not asked the sick man anything but responded to the great faith he witnessed in the four determined men.

We naturally would assume that there was great excitement and pleasure in the room with Jesus and the healing act, but no. How dare Jesus say these things? How dare he forgive sins? Who does he think he is?

Jesus asks these outraged persons this question. Is it easier for me to say to the man your sins are forgiven or to say to take up your mat and walk? Know that I have the power

to forgive sins and I can make this man walk. And the man did walk out of the room praising God. Remember the people of Jesus' day believed an ill person was to blame for their condition. They were curious about what was their sin? Jesus surprised them by this response to the mattress coming down from the roof.

The beauty of this story is how Jesus responded to the love and devotion of the four men who believed Jesus could make a difference in the life of their friend. He healed the cripple because of their faith not that of the paralytic man.

The disciples with Jesus no doubt themselves felt shame for their own annoyance at this disturbance when Jesus was speaking. Here again they witnessed Jesus having time to respond to acts of faith and the physical and mental needs of the seekers. Many of those around Jesus had a hard time celebrating what Jesus had done as it did not fit their picture of what God was like.

Jesus the man of surprises urged men and women to open their eyes and their ears to the needs around them and to not be people who condemned and found fault. Celebrate the faith of the four men who understood what it meant to love not passively but in action and belief.

As we enter this pilgrimage to Jerusalem we need to have our eyes, ears and heart open to the word of God to us as believers. Listen and follow what I say urged Jesus and do as you have seen me do. Walk with me and experience God in your life and be joyous in the wonder of God's love and goodness. Know that you are a child of God and in gratitude worship and thank the Creator God.

The disciples and the many other men and women who followed Jesus for three years had seen so many incidents of Jesus having time for the needs of others. They so often misjudged the reactions of Jesus and were brought up short by his actions, patience and understanding love.

You recall the time when Jesus and the disciples were together at the end of a long day and a woman entered the room and walked over to Jesus who was reclined on a day couch. She knelt at his feet and wept and brushed the tears off his feet with her hair. Then she opened a vial of very expensive and aromatic perfume and spread the perfume on his feet. Jesus did not move as the woman washed his feet with her tears and the perfume. You can imagine the tut tuts heard around the room as the disciples were shocked by this action and the extravagance of the perfume costs. What a waste! This money could have been used better in other ways! Think of the poor who could have used this money!

Jesus saw and heard the reactions of the disciples but he concentrated on the woman. Leave her alone and do not judge her for she has done a beautiful thing out of her sorrow and love. Why do you belittle her? Are you so hardened you can not understand and accept a gift freely given to me? Jesus thanked her and she went on her way. What a surprise this benevolent reaction of Jesus. Jesus urges us to never lose our ability to appreciate an act of goodness and kindness and to be careful of our quick tendency

to judge harshly and unfairly. This is not the way of God who has infinite interest in each man and woman and waits for the time when they will come on their own in love and thanksgiving. If God be like that, how can we not try to emulate God in all we do even though we stumble and fail? God offers forgiveness and we need to be willing to forgive ourselves and our neighbour as we follow the loving God.

This is the man Jesus we walk beside on the road to Jerusalem. We need to feel the excitement, to be open to new discoveries, to be awoken again in the faith that is so critical to our very being. And what a drama it all is! If an author wrote this story we would be fascinated but say that it could never happen in real life. How and why would an all powerful God stoop to our level and send God's son into the world to take on our reality? Is it possible the Creator God loves us all that much and cares that deeply for us? This is all impossible, so many say today.

This is why for those who believe in Christ Lent is such a wonderful opportunity to renew our faith, to walk the road once again in humble faithfulness. For 2000 years, men and women have prepared themselves through the events of Easter so as to be renewed in faith and to rediscover the wonder of God's actions through the man Jesus we call the Christ.

So people of St. Matthew's join in the pilgrimage. Take advantage of the time to thank God for an overwhelming love which invites us into a stronger relationship with God through Jesus our Lord.

So I ask this question: Why not journey this year with us here? Join us for the services if you can in Holy Week. If possible join us the Wednesday and Thursday noon hours for worship and fellowship with our neighbours. Come Maundy Thursday evening as we informally reenact the last night of Jesus' life and celebrate together the breaking of unleavened bread and drink from the cup of Christ's sacrifice.

Together on Good Friday, we will carry the cross and at the end of the Good Friday service touch the cross and give our thanks. Finally on Easter Sunday, we will experience the joy in the ever living Christ as we celebrate the empty tomb and sing with fervour "Christ the Lord is Risen Today!"

To me, this is a wondrous pilgrimage we can freely walk together as we approach the cross. It is a journey I would not miss.

I look forward to journeying with each of you as you share your faith with me and as I share my faith with you.

Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus Christ whose life inspires and comforts us as we live our journey each day in God's name. Amen