

John 11:17-45
Sixth Sunday in Lent

05.04.20

The Narrative of a vulnerable God

One of the joys – and challenges – of preaching is that week in and week out you are faced with these familiar texts from which you have to mine a Word from God, and they may often be texts that you have preached on many times before. The texts don't change – but of course the context does: the situation in which you are called to read and to preach. And that is what makes preaching in this strange time of crisis and lockdown so stimulating: old, familiar Bible passages reveal new depths, new meanings, when read in this strange time.

So here we are on Palm Sunday and we normally have a procession in the church and much singing, for we read of Jesus entering Jerusalem for the final week of his life, riding on a donkey with a colt, and a crowd acclaiming him. And the passage is freighted with allusions to the Old Testament and of kings making joyful entrances into Jerusalem. Reading this passage in our present context, however, brought to my mind one feature of the passage that especially resonates, I think, with our current context, and that is Jesus' vulnerability – and I'll say a bit more about vulnerability in a moment. But for now just consider what Jesus is doing in entering Jerusalem. Jerusalem, for Jesus, is a dangerous place. It is the seat of power, the religious and political centre of the nation, and as such is at odds with the movement Jesus is heading up in the North of the country, in Galilee. Clearly Jesus has been being watched from Jerusalem – in a previous chapter we read that Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem to interrogate Jesus, accusing him of deviating from the law. So Jesus here is like Daniel entering the lions' den. And he doesn't sneak in surreptitiously, hidden among the crowds that flocked to Jerusalem for the Passover festival: no, he deliberately stages

this procession on a donkey, making himself visible – and making himself vulnerable.

As I have pointed out before when preaching on Palm Sunday, scholars tell us that around the time Jesus did this it is highly likely that the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, would also have entered Jerusalem, only his entry would have been very different. His would have been full of pomp and ceremony, and it would have been strongly militaristic. This was Passover season, after all, a time when Jews recalled their liberation under Moses from the foreign power of Egypt, and it was likely that if any plots against Roman rule were simmering this would have been the moment to strike. So Pilate's procession is a warning – don't even think about it! - and there would have been much military hardware, swords and spears and warhorses and all the trappings of imperial Rome. Everything about that procession spoke of power, and intimidation and threat. And Jesus enters – well, on a donkey with a colt. He has no weaponry. His ragbag followers have no uniforms or armour, just their cloaks that they spread before him. Jesus comes not in the name of Rome but in the name of the Lord. In fact his procession is a parody of Pilate's. Where Pilate's entry is all about the power of Rome's empire, Jesus' entry is all about the weakness, the vulnerability of God's Kingdom and its strange king.

So maybe this is a moment to give a definition of vulnerability and I would suggest something short and simple, namely 'an openness to being wounded'. Just that: an openness to being wounded' is what we are talking about, and it's related to a degree of powerlessness. When we are in some measure powerless then we are open to being wounded. And it's interesting to see how vulnerability runs like a thread through this week of Jesus' life that we call Holy week. For a start, after entering Jerusalem we read that Jesus drove out the traders who were buying and selling in the temple – he felt that the true

purpose of the temple had been lost. But what follows is beautiful: we read that ‘the blind and the lame came to him’ in the temple and he cured them. Well, what is striking is that the Law forbade the blind and the lame to enter the temple, yet now they are being given their place there. And we read that there were children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ echoing the shouts of the crowd as Jesus entered Jerusalem. So we have the blind and the lame and the children – and they are all vulnerable groups, powerless, and Jesus is gathering them together where they belong.

Then of course later in the week Jesus meets with his disciples to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. And that of course recalls a time when God’s people were slaves in Egypt: vulnerable and exploited, but God heard the cry - as he always hears the cry of the vulnerable - and set them free. And Jesus is vulnerable here: he celebrates the Passover secretly in an upper room, with careful covert arrangements for at this point he is a wanted man! And after that meal Jesus goes out to a garden with his disciples, called Gethsemane, and there we find a very poignant scene: Jesus, knowing what is coming, is greatly agitated and he goes off to pray, but he takes with him Peter and James and John, his closest disciples, and he asks them to stay and to pray with him. Here is Jesus so vulnerable – about to be betrayed, taken and arrested and he’s longing for company, yearning for the support of friends, for his nearest and dearest to stand by him. But they fail him. And when the moment of his arrest comes one of his followers pulls his sword and lashes out, but Jesus will have none of it. His chosen vulnerability will not be eased by the false power of violence. And of course the next day, on what we call Good Friday, Jesus’ vulnerability, his capacity to be wounded, is exposed most painfully in his execution, the laceration of his body with whips and the penetration of his flesh by nails.

Well, Christians see as these events unfold the narrative of a vulnerable God, a God who is the Maker and Sustainer of all things and who is self-sufficient and complete without us, and yet who reaches out to us and by so doing renders himself vulnerable: vulnerable to our rejection, vulnerable to our hatred and our wounding. This surely is the staggering thing about this God, the God of Jesus Christ. He has yoked himself to his chosen people Israel, and through them he has yoked himself to the world. And to walk this road is to render God profoundly vulnerable – and it leads to Holy Week and thence to the cross and to the wounding and scarring God. Yet out of that comes life, redemption, salvation. By God's vulnerability we are healed.

Well, you can guess why this motif struck me as I read once again the texts for this Palm Sunday and Holy Week. Truly, we are being shown to be deeply vulnerable. We human beings who are so powerful, so resourceful, so 'in control': yet how we are laid low by a microscopic virus! Indeed, we who imagine that we are lords of nature, in dominion over the natural world with our science and our technology and ability to constrain nature to our will – well, increasingly our vulnerability before nature is being exposed: global warming, forest fires, natural disasters. With a flick of its wrist nature is able to throw our carefully constructed world into disarray. And of course there are other calamities that reveal our vulnerability: financial crashes and terrorist attacks. We are never as in control as we like to think.

Maybe, however, this is an opportunity to discover something that we need to hold fast to and to cherish, namely that vulnerability is the truth of who we are. We all like to appear strong, indeed we cultivate strength and we try to eliminate risk and uncertainty and to minimise the areas where we lack control. And the world encourages this in the interest of success and fulfilment. A good business plan eliminates

vulnerability and all risks are calculated. But actually it is where we are most vulnerable that we are most human. So, to take some examples, love, of course, make us profoundly vulnerable. To say 'I love you' is to invite rejection. To love someone is to open ourselves to the risk that our love will be used, and exploited and rejected and that we will be hurt. But to live without that risk, to self-isolate ourselves or to grow a protective shell to shield us from the pain of love is to renounce our humanity. Again, to have children is to make yourself vulnerable: you never know how they will turn out or what impact they will have on your life – for better or for worse. And to forgive is to make us vulnerable – it opens us up to the risk that we will be taken advantage of. And of course our vulnerability exposes our pretence at self-sufficiency and opens us up to God, even as God opens himself to us. In our vulnerability we are cast back onto God. And these are the things that make us human. And of course we know from people like Van Gogh that it is from our wounds and our scars that great beauty is often born. And it is out of vulnerability that community is born for we discover that no-one can be an island for we need one another. And indeed it is out of vulnerability that empathy and compassion grows.

The great Dutch spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, wrote a book called the Wounded Healer. It's a beautiful image. It suggests that our woundedness can help us to be a source of healing for others. We learn that our scars can help us to better feel the pain of others, it can make us more empathetic, more compassionate, less judgemental – more human. We are indeed wounded, scarred, cracked – but as the late great Leonard Cohen put: it's through the cracks that the light gets in.

The story of Holy Week, leading from an act of street theatre on Palm Sunday to the horror of Golgotha and the cross is the narrative of a vulnerable God: a God who risks opening himself to wounding, to surrendering control. It is the narrative

of a compassionate God, the ultimate wounded healer. And we, in this time are confronted with our vulnerability, we little people so at risk, so threatened. Yet this is the truth of who we are. And to embrace it is to embrace life in all its fullness. Amen .