

made. And so it challenges us. The Cross requires of us a response. This turning point of world history, this paradigm of suffering love, it requires a response. Double or quits. Believe, and hope; or turn away in despair. The Cross stands firm while the world spins, as an old saying has it. On Christian hope you can build a life. It's rock, not sand. What is that hope? Not just that radical change is possible – but that it is inevitable, because God has already made His choice.

So here we stand with the crowd, waving our palms, hoping against hope. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Here comes the King, crowned with thorns, riding on the foal of a donkey. Rejoice. Repent. Hope.

Hosanna

HOLY WEEK IN THE TIME OF CRISIS—*Palm Sunday*

It never ceases to shock, does it? A good man, an innocent man, brutally treated, railroaded through a mockery of justice, tortured slowly to death. Put to a slave's death, the most humiliating punishment devised by the Romans, grisly butchers though they were. It never ceases to shock.



This year, more than most, I feel that the horrible story resonates. We live amidst wars, and rumours of wars; injustice and cruelty; holders of high office lack morality; a whole culture losing the capacity to distinguish truth from

falsehood; political and social institutions, which we thought would look after us, crumbling to dust; the population lashing out in anger, their hopes disappointed. I am hearing people speak about a 'polycrisis' – a way of acknowledging the dread that, on multiple fronts at once, things are spinning out of control.

In such a time as this, we come to Holy Week. I have given the overall title to this week's series of sermons and talks, Holy Week in the Time of Crisis. 'Crisis' has its usual sense here – a time that is bad and scary. But 'crisis' carries also a resonance of the Greek word from which it comes: which means choice and judgement. We face a choice: to succumb to despair, or to rise to the challenge. At times like now, it matters more than ever that we should speak of hope.

In this week's talks, I will be sharing with you some of my own struggles, to find a way to speak credibly of hope when things seem bleak. I will try to speak about the Cross and the Resurrection as being the source of hope - the hope of the church, the hope of humanity, and the hope of all creation. What account of hope is big enough and bold enough for our times?

Let's consider today the crowd who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. Themselves full of hope, it appears. Whom did they think they were welcoming? And why was His arrival such good news? We don't have to guess the answers to those questions; the gospel-writers tell us: "Hosanna to the Son of David!" is the cry in Matthew; "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" in Mark. The crowd's joy is in the coming kingdom. Which is to say, the coming of the King.

What will it be like, this Kingdom of God about which the crowd is so excited? Jesus has preached about it for years, across the length and breadth of the land. It's his main theme. The kingdom is topsy-turvy, compared to the sad old world our own rulers have created: upside down and back to front, compared to how we run the world. Those with power will be overturned; the rich will be cast down, and the hungry lifted up. Prisoners will be freed, the oppressed will be liberated, the excluded brought home.

This overturning – dare we call it a revolution? – is not for its own sake, but so as to enable God's personal and sovereign rule. Hierarchies of riches and power are in the way of God's sovereignty. They must be swept away – the

royal road through the wilderness is to be levelled and laid out - so as to enable the triumph of mercy, love, justice. The Kingdom will be a state of affairs where all are cared for; all are seen, known and valued; where difference provokes curiosity, not hatred.

This wonderful vision of mercy, justice and inclusion inspired the crowd's hope. The coming sovereign reign of God was the reason why the crowds welcomed Jesus so ecstatically. Because He was the King, the Son of David, who not only brought good tidings of the coming kingdom, but in His own person embodied the Kingdom.

The other main thing Jesus said about the Kingdom, is that it is close at hand. Here and now – Jesus says – any moment – pay attention!

It's an exciting message, and the crowd are justifiably excited. But then, everything seems to go wrong. Perhaps some of the people waving palms also joined a different crowd, later in the week, shouting "crucify him". By Friday, Jesus is nailed up, with the title of King on a sign above his head. Perhaps it's a prophecy, or perhaps a cruel irony?

This is a game of double or quits. For the crowd, and for us. Jesus is either a conquering King; or he is a defeated rebel; either the Christ of God, or a punished blasphemer. There is no half-way house. Either Palm Sunday's hope of the Kingdom is a vain hope, that will be defeated by the cruel logic of events. Or we can place our faith in the Cross, and see the events of Holy Week, of Good Friday, and of Easter Day... as an exploration, a demonstration, and ultimately a vindication, of the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom which arises not from conquest and oppression, but from the irresistible power of God's self-sacrificing love.

These will be the themes of my talks over the course of this week: how the Cross show the nature of the Kingdom, the character of God, the choices of God... and how all of this inspires hope. I will say more about the nature of the Kingdom, and how its imminent arrival invites us to live in hope – to live, here-and-now, in contrast with and in witness to the darkness around us. I will explore how we can feed our imaginations so as to fan the flames of hope in our hearts. And I will say more about what the imminence of the Kingdom means for our religious practice, its purpose and priorities. Holy Week takes us beyond religion – in a sense, even beyond morality and ethics. It simply shows us what is true; what is real; what choices has God