

*Grace Lutheran Community, 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2020: Palm/ Passion Sunday*

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But I trust in You, O LORD; I say, "You are my God."  
Psalm 31:14)

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit our Comforter and Guide.

Recently I watched a clip on YouTube from 'The LUMO Project' (which is making the Bible in video), and the text was Luke 18:15-17 (Jesus blesses the little children). What was fascinating in this video was the noise of the crowd as they surrounded Jesus. There were a lot of excited people, and the disciples tried to push them away. But in this world of noise Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me."

This Sunday we celebrate 'Palm Sunday' – Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem as the people of Israel were beginning their preparations for Passover. This was a very noisy occasion as well. Can you imagine the many people preparing for Passover, and the noise...? A significant portion of Jesus' life encompassed crowds and noise. Yes, Scripture does record that Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Luke 5:16). He did this in order to commune with His heavenly Father, but also in order to be energised in His encounters with many people in need. The silence served community.

This Palm Sunday will be radically different. There will not be the sound of crowds. There won't be people in Palm procession entering church buildings. Instead, there will be 'social distancing' and many 'sounds of silence'. How are you coping with this? Are you ready for what looks like many months in this situation – without the social contact, the noise of sporting matches or shopping centres, and the laughter or tears of people you know and love being in the room with you? How is this new world situation affecting you? How has it impacted on others around you?

Some people have suggested that for those who are more like 'introverts', these coming days may not be as challenging. But we all need the hugs and sounds and voices of other people around us. And various social media applications (such as the basic telephone [!], Video Messenger, FaceTime, Skype, WhatsApp, Google Duo and the like) may help us remain connected as best we can. But we will not have the same contact with others. It's sometimes difficult to look through a social-media-app to see either the wry smile or anguished eyes in another person.

We are also aware that this 'social distancing' will have impact on many people in various other ways. Already telephone counselling services that assist people who experience depression, or domestic violence or other situations are experiencing an increase in calls.

There are many others worried about the effects of ‘Corononomics’ – with people being suddenly unemployed, and the present and future implications. Others are experiencing stress from changed working conditions. The list could go on... How has your world been changed? What have been your challenges? Are there also areas where you have experienced some positive care and connection?

As we begin ‘Holy Week’, and reflect on this day of ‘Palm Sunday’ and ‘Passion Sunday’, we see something of this dual theme of noise and silence. Palm Sunday traditionally begins with the Palm Gospel (and the noise of Jesus’ entry in Jerusalem). But the Bible Readings then focus on Jesus’ suffering and death. And so Psalm 31 helps us to prepare us for ‘Holy Week’.

In the midst of all the various words from the Bible about suffering, and pain and death of Jesus (see Gospel for today: Matthew 27:11-54) there are these words in our Psalm, ‘But I trust in You, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.”’ And certainly a key word here is ‘trust’.

The Hebrew for this word ‘trust’ is *batah*. This word is important, and we can learn something from the Septuagint, that is, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture. The Septuagint does not translate this word *batah* with the word usually associated with ‘trust’, that is ‘believe in’ (*pisteuo*). Rather, the word ‘hope’ (*elpizo*) is used. What does this mean for us? It seems to indicate that *batah*, or ‘trust’, is not some ‘intellectual exercise’ where “I put my trust in the Lord” (‘make a decision’ to ‘trust God’). Rather, *batah*, or ‘trust’, has that feeling of being safe and secure. It’s like the little child who is anxious as the storms howl, but the mother picks the child in her arms and says, “Everything will be alright” in a calm voice. And then she gently sings the child to sleep (knowing that being anxious won’t change the storm, or whatever may come).

This word ‘hope’ is important. The Bible reminds us that those who hope in God will be delivered from their enemies (Psalm.22:4). Those who hope in God will have their prayers answered (1 Chronicles.5:20). Those who hope in God will walk in straight paths (Proverbs.3:5). Those who hope in God will be given joy and gladness (Psalms.16:9; 33:21). And those who hope in God will know inner joy and peace and the absence of fear (Psalm.4:8; Isaiah.26:3).

Interesting here also is what the Bible considers as sources of ‘false security’. Some of these we would say are obvious such as wickedness (Isaiah.47:10); violence and oppression (Psalms.55:23; 62:10; Isaiah.30:12); idols (Psalms.31:6; 115:8; Isaiah.42:17; Habbakuk.2:18). In most cases we would say that violence and evil won’t give you a sense of enduring security. But we also know that there is something at work in the world which seems to suggest that if you can somehow ‘get it over someone else’ than ‘you will be better off’ (that is, if can take advantage of someone else, then you will be secure).

But the Bible also suggests that other areas where we may have a 'false security', and these maybe not always as obvious to us (because in some ways these things are also necessary and good). But we can have a 'false trust' in military might (Deuteronomy.28:52); or our own sense of 'righteousness' (Ezekiel.33:13; Hosea.10:13); or having money (Psalms.49:6; 52:7; Proverbs.11:28), and even in our own sense of one's abilities (that is, trust in self: Psalms.118:8; 146:3; Proverbs.25:19; Jeremiah.17:5).

One could spend a long time on each one of these, seeking to analyse how each of these may give a false sense of security. But one of the chief things that may lead to have uncomfortable levels of 'anxiety' is trust in our own self, and our own abilities. And that is why when people have 'sinned', when people have done some 'wrong', they may also feel a weight of 'anxiety' in their life. If 'being right or good' depends on 'my own effort' then there will always be a weight or a knot in the heart because we know that we (and others around us) don't always 'get it right'. But here God has incredibly good news for us in and through Christ Jesus, and His suffering for us.

Are you anxious about yourself? Do you have a sense of 'anxiety' about 'others', or 'being near others'? Are you anxious about what the future may hold for you? How many others around you be anxious, feeling a 'noise' from the world, or even a greater in 'silence' not only in their homes but in their hearts?

One of the most fascinating things about our Psalm for today, and it is only hinted at when start our Psalm Reading today at verse 9, is that Psalm 31 contains a very important word in the life of Jesus. When Jesus spoke from the cross, He had 'seven words' (or sayings). And the seventh and final 'word' from the cross of Jesus is: 'Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit' (Luke.23:46). Psalm 31:5 says, 'Into Your hands I commend my spirit'.

The image of hand is important in Psalm 31 (vv.5, 8, 15). According to one Bible Dictionary 'hand' means 'grasp' or 'power'. The Psalmist declares that God's hand upholds him. God is holding him fast.

Jesus knew that even when He was literally in the clutches of His foes, they could never 'grasp' or possess Him. They might seize Him, but they could not hold Him. He knew He was not 'in the hand of the enemy' (Psalm.31:8) but 'in the hand of God' (Psalm.31:5,15).

At times in our life we may become anxious about many things, and these things are not just the physical storms of life. Yes – there are 'physical storms' in life, and these have to do not only with things like viruses and other such events. They may also be when we may receive some news from a doctor that all is not well, either for ourselves or someone we know. At other times there may 'emotional storms' – perhaps through the death of a loved one, or having

to deal with family conflict or the like. Or we may experience a 'spiritual storm' in our soul.

But in whatever situation we find ourselves in life, Psalm 31 points to an eternal hope. Psalm 31:24 says: "Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all who wait for the LORD." God holds you safe in the palm of His hand. Do you believe this...?

In some ways it takes courage to follow Jesus. The reality of His death is not for the faint of heart, for to watch Jesus die is to face our own death too. But by faith can we say, "I trust in You, O Lord... 'You are my God,' my times are in Your hand".

We are about to enter Holy Week, and the sounds we normally expect to experience won't be around this year. Families won't have large Easter lunches. Church Buildings will be silent. And we remember Jesus, who entered Jerusalem to the shout of the crowd but a few days whose heart itself was silenced.

When a troubling situation arises, a natural reaction is to be overcome with dread and anxiety. But God's love for you is never silenced. God has never changed. He is still faithful today. We can confidently expect Him to act on our behalf as well. Let not the enemy undermine your confidence in the goodness of God's character and the faithfulness of His steadfast love. How radically are our lives changed through Jesus. Psalm 31 reminds us that our "times are in Your hand".

When you see Jesus die for you on the cross, there can be no doubt that God loves you. That Jesus forgives you. Your life is in His hands. May Jesus fill you with peace this week, knowing that it's all in His hands.

And may the peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen