

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 5th April 2020

Matthew 21: 1 – 11; Matthew 27: 11 – 26, 45 - 54

Gracious God, together through the power of your Spirit, prepare our minds to hear your Word. Move our hearts to accept what we hear. Purify our wills to faithfully follow Jesus Christ in joy and faith. Amen.

"I am writing to you from Italy," began Francesca Melandri, an Italian novelist, in a one-thousand-word letter to us in the U.K. published in the Guardian at the weekend. "I am writing to you from Italy..."¹

Ms Melandri wrote in order to give us a picture of our future. "We are now where you will be in a few days..." she wrote. She went on to describe a roller coaster; a society being remade from what it was just a few weeks ago.

She wrote about a world of contradictions and resentments; of hunger and excess; of jubilation and fear. You'll eat, she wrote. You'll miss your family. You'll discover a new, unstoppable online social life. You'll rebuild burned bridges, but divorces will soar. You'll be afraid. You'll worry about those who have no home to be confined in, those who are alone, those who have no job. You'll no longer feel like an individual, but no one's experience of this will be exactly the same. "You'll want to cover with rose petals all medical workers' steps," she wrote. You'll play music loudly, you'll laugh often - with a gallows humour. "You will ask yourselves if this is how societies collapse," she wrote. "Does it really happen so fast? You'll block out these thoughts and ... you'll eat again."

That's just a flavour of the roller coaster she described; of emotions, of a society being remodelled, of coping strategies, of life that was unimaginable back then, five weeks ago, on Sunday the 1st of March, that first Sunday of Lent 2020.

Lent: that journey to Jerusalem; that walk with Jesus to the cross; that season of fasting; that reconsideration of our material lives, its excesses; that examination of our sinfulness; that rejuvenating of our spiritual lives; that period of preparation for transformation, for the world not being the same again. Has there ever been a season of Lent quite like this one?

And here we are now on the brink of Holy Week, on the Sunday when we celebrate Palm Sunday and the journey from that point to our commemoration of Jesus' Passion and his crucifixion. Francesca Melandri wrote, "You'll laugh... You'll want to cover with rose petals all medical workers steps... You will ask yourselves if this is how societies collapse..." What a roller-coaster of a time.

It was a roller-coaster of time too for Jesus during that final week in Jerusalem between his entrance on Palm Sunday to his crucifixion. He arrived to shouts of jubilation and encouragement, "When he entered Jerusalem the whole city went wild with excitement," writes Matthew. Our nation went wild with excitement.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/27/a-letter-to-the-uk-from-italy-this-is-what-we-know-about-your-future>

Didn't we do that,

"Clapping, banging pots and pans, cheering and waving at neighbors with whom they are no longer able to shake hands, vast numbers of people took part in the "Clap for our Carers initiative,"²

wrote the New York Times of a week past Thursday's noisy encouragement for those at the forefront of our battle against Covid-19.

That noisy encouragement has been part of our Lent and was part of Jesus' final week, as was his hunger and his desire to eat. "You'll eat," wrote Ms Melandri. "Next morning on his way to the city Jesus felt hungry; and seeing a fig-tree at the roadside he went up to it..." wrote Matthew.³

In that final week Jesus would hold what we call today press conferences, "He entered the temple, and the chief priests and the elders of the nation came to him with questions..." Matthew goes on to say.⁴ We're very familiar with that.

During that week Jesus found support from his friends - the Last Supper. He felt abandoned by them in the Garden of Gethsemane. He ended up divorced from Judas Iscariot. "You'll have an unstoppable online social life... You'll miss your adult children... many of us will fall asleep vowing that the very first thing you'll do as soon as the lockdown is over is file for divorce," wrote Ms Melandri.

During that week Jesus drove the money changers from the Temple. He was demonstrating how society needed to remodel not just its values and priorities, but economics. We're doing that.

There would be times during that week when he would speak forcefully of judgement and persecution. That's happened to us. But, there would also be times when he would weep for what he was seeing, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..."⁵

Alongside the anger and the tears there were touching, personal intimate moments of revelation, "Jesus was at Bethany ... when a woman came to him with a small bottle of fragrant oil, very costly; and as he sat at table, she began to pour it over his head." Ms Melandri wrote from Italy, "The true nature of the people around you will be revealed with total clarity... ." That woman, Peter, Judas.

In Gethsemane that week Jesus prayed, then he prayed some more, and then he prayed again. The explosion of online thoughts and prayers from churches has been extraordinary these past few weeks.

In that final week of Lent between Palm Sunday and Good Friday in Jesus' life there was so much that is familiar to us now: economic upheaval, euphoria, fear, worry, questioning, friendships strengthened, friendships broken, tears, prayer, revelations, intimate moments. It was an endurance test, for some these present times are like that too. It was chaotic in the Temple when he was there, for some these present times feel like that too.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/03/26/world/europe/26reuters-health-coronavirus-britain-applause.html>

³ Matthew 21: 18

⁴ Matthew 21: 23

⁵ Matthew 21: 37

Then at the end there were these words, "Eli, Eli, lema sasabachtani?" My God, my God why have you forsaken me?

In the middle of her letter, Ms Melandri wrote "You will ask yourselves if this is how societies collapse. Does it really happen so fast?"

My God, my God why have you forsaken me? Is this how it ends?

That is what Ms Melandri wrote in the middle of her letter. What she wrote at the end of her letter, her last sentence was,

"If we turn our gaze to the more distant future, the future which is unknown both to you and to us too, we can only tell you this: when all of this is over, the world won't be the same."

This is the final Sunday of Lent, and these coming days will be the days of Holy Week, and then after that, next Sunday, the world won't be the same.

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.