

A Pastoral Letter from Bishop Jonathan:

Everything is upside down this year; nothing is as it should be, not least that this is a homily to read; one I won't be preaching, and one so different from the one I would have been preaching had I been, as planned, in Cheltenham. And so I dare to ask you to read this homily if possible *before* you read the passion, not after, as this year will be for most of us a unique experience, one in which God is asking us to be attentive.

Each year, as we stand on the brink of Holy Week, we stand on the brink of a journey. It is one of the great joys of any pilgrim to the Holy City of Jerusalem, and something I always seek to accentuate when leading pilgrims there, that they should experience the city, know the city, *through their feet*, not with their heads; they should have a strong 'muscle memory' of the terrain of the city, and Jesus's journey through every quarter of it in the course of his final days.

It is a journey that Jesus initiates; a change in the tide of events that he even *provokes*. He had deliberately delayed his arrival in Bethany until Lazarus was dead, so as 'to reveal God's glory' (*John* 11.4; 40). The gathering crowds of Passover pilgrims had heard of the miracle and were on the alert. And Jesus gave them the sign, which they all too readily accepted, "Behold your king is coming, lowly and sitting on a donkey." "Blessed is he who comes: David's Son, Messiah". From the dramatic moment that Jesus sets off on the back of a donkey and crosses the valley between Bethany and Jerusalem he took the whole of Jerusalem on a journey: crowds, authorities, disciples, all.

His final days see Jesus constantly on the move, and his disciples with him – entering Jerusalem to applause and glory, teaching in the Temple and on its great southern ramparts, crowding into the upper room to eat the Passover, slipping unobserved through one of the city's smallest gates on the lonely night-passage to the Mount of Olives to pray. The disciples flee and one or two tail him as he's bundled into a rigged trial in the early hours, exposed to the crowd who by now have lost interest, and forced to make a grotesque procession to Calvary. Behind and beyond all this bustle and agitation, as the focus narrows and the cast falls away one by one, another journey emerges – the one we watch, horrified, unable to stop it. A human being hailed as king at the beginning of the week, falls unstoppably out of favour with the mob, into isolation, out of reach of his friends, into unprotected suffering. It's a journey that Luke calls his exodus, his passage toward and through death to the 'day that has no evening'.

After years of practice Christians have a kind of 'muscle memory' for this journey. We're ready and eager to begin our journey through this week, alongside the disciples, holding on as the focus narrows and the danger tightens, praying and hoping, our eyes fixed on the Lord. The liturgy by which we recall God's mighty acts in these events is also full of movement: think of the Palm Sunday procession, the gathering in church as at the cenacle of the Last Supper, following the Blessed Sacrament on Maundy Thursday with newly washed feet to the altar of Gethsemane, trudging the *via crucis* to venerate the cross on Good Friday, may be the stations of the cross or an ecumenical walk of witness.

But no. This year our muscles, our minds and our hearts are to be deprived. Though we are prepared and ready after our Lenten fast, the path has been pulled from under our feet. There is no limit to what coronavirus will steal from mankind: preventing loved ones from accompanying fathers, mothers, children, through their last days and hours; preventing mourners from keeping watch and burying their dead; preventing believers from accompanying their dying Lord, and burying him in his tomb like a seed in the earth. Of all people, let Christians in this Holy Week accompany the suffering and dying, the dead and grieving, with a compassion and prayer learned in our bones from centuries of devotion.

God's ways are not our ways. The Lord has laid out a different path for us this year, a tougher, more unfamiliar one. It will feel like a difficult gift to receive, but no doubt it is a gift, and comes from his hand. We are asked to make an *inward journey*, one we don't know by habit or reassuring ceremony. Stripped of the fuss of Holy Week preparations, and the drama and motion of its liturgies, we are invited to walk an inward path, to learn how to keep Christ close company with our own meager resources; to stand alone before Christ, in his gaze, and alone before his Cross; to learn as a body that in this solitude, this attention and this exposure to the gaze of God, we are strangely more profoundly connected – with Christ, and with one another.

It is in fact something we already know. We knew it when we were baptized, baptized into his death; when we began not to live for ourselves alone, when we were taken up into his life. Knowing this we must follow Christ through each day of this unique Holy Week journey—reading and reflecting on the gospels, using what the churches and broadcasters are making available, one eye firmly fixed on the suffering and fearful world he so greatly loved—and ready to arrive at the cross. We are asked to allow our wisdom and preferences and judgments to be crucified with him, to be remade, and to take on new shape by the truth that he reveals to us about what is true, and honourable, and just, and pure, and pleasing to God (*Phil 4.9*).

The Passion story traditionally read on Palm Sunday can be found in St Matthew's Gospel 26.14—end of 27

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you humbled yourself in taking the form of a servant, to reveal the Father's glory, and travelled the path of obedience for our salvation: give us the mind to follow you and to proclaim you as our Lord and King; through the same Jesus Christ. Amen

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Jonathan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'J'.