

## Palm Sunday

Matthew 21: 1 – 11



William Hubert Vanstone was a priest of what we might today call ‘the old school’. He lived through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was extremely well-qualified and talented academically, but chose to devote himself all his life to pastoral work in parishes and cathedral chapter. He is remembered for his wide-ranging pastoral talents, and for the publication of several spiritual books, of which ‘Love’s Endeavour, Love’s Expense’ and ‘The Stature of Waiting’ are perhaps the best known. The themes of both these books have much to say to us as we journey from Palm Sunday through Holy Week and towards Easter this year, in the midst as we are of the Covid 19 pandemic and the strange ways of living that it has brought us. In particular, in ‘The Stature of Waiting’ Vanstone explores the value of passivity – of waiting, of inactivity over against our normal frenetic activity, of powerlessness in the face of uncontrollable power – such waiting, indeed, as Jesus endured in his last days before his crucifixion - such waiting as we ourselves might identify with today.

In ‘Love’s Endeavour, Love’s Expense’, Vanstone explores the related theme of the way in which God, in Jesus, is prepared to suffer lovingly and without limit – the love that, shown in Jesus, is poured out into the world from the arms of Jesus on the cross. As part of his meditations on this theme, Vanstone wrote a poem, Love’s Endeavour, Love’s Expense, sometimes sung as a hymn (preferably, in my view, to the tune Song 13 by Orlando Gibbons) and it is this poem that will form the framework for these Holy Week meditations during this particularly dark time in the world as we know it.

The poem begins: *Morning glory, starlit sky/ soaring music, scholars’ truth/ flight of swallows, autumn leaves/ memory’s treasure, grace of youth.*

There is, for me, an almost unbearable poignancy about those words as Vanstone opens his poem by reflecting on the goodness of God, the potentiality inherent in every human life and the extraordinary gifts that God bestows day by day on humanity through both the glories of creation and the almost limitless potential of human beings. And yet, at the same time, in the back of our minds, and surely Vanstone’s as well, there is always the knowledge that these gifts have so often been wasted and misused. They have been turned from being the manifestations of love that God intended into the means by which human beings have manipulated and exploited one another and meted out destruction on the natural world that is God’s creation just as much as we are. We will see that more clearly as we look at verse 2 tomorrow.

But today we are invited by our gospel reading to stand in the streets of Jerusalem with the crowds and wave our palm branches in welcome for Jesus, the king who came into his holy city, riding on a humble donkey and hearing the cheers of those who a short time later called for his execution. Those of us who know how the story unfolds can surely not hear this passage of scripture without feeling somehow that

same sense of poignancy as Vanstone expresses – all that potential, all that possibility, all the good that might have developed in the lives of the people if they had really listened to him – all, by the end of the week, to be apparently wasted and broken on a cross. As we watch the procession, so we also are invited to feel the weight of the world's brokenness – the world's sin and destructiveness, the fault-lines that run through the whole of creation - that Jesus carried. The superficially happy occasion is fatally marred, it seems, by the poignant knowledge of what comes next.

We cannot avoid this poignancy. It would be over-cynical, of course, to say that all good things have an inner dark cloud that we ignore at our peril – just as it is over-glib, it seems to me, to talk about clouds having silver linings in terrible circumstances such as the world faces just at the moment. But the juxtaposition of the good and the evil, the glory and the pain, is a characteristic of all human experience, just as it is at the heart of the Christian faith. And it is drawn out for us, it seems to me, particularly today, on Palm Sunday, when we see Jesus riding into Jerusalem to cheering crowds, even as we know that he faces death in just a few days' time. All that good possibility and potential heading, it seems, straight for the waste-heap of Golgotha.

But it is also, I think, as we feel the poignancy of this Palm Sunday narrative, that we are also enabled to face the darkness of our lives with hope. The sadness that I feel as I watch Jesus riding the donkey into Jerusalem, carrying the broken world with him into the future, is not the terrified distress of my being abandoned to evil. Rather it is the empathy that Jesus calls me to feel as I enter the darkness with him, but am assured at the same time that he is carrying the brokenness of the world, on the donkey, for me and for the world.

As Christians we are people of hope – Easter hope - and we are called to live always in the assurance that light and truth and goodness are always stronger than evil. But the poignancy of the donkey-ride on Palm Sunday – and indeed the journey that lies ahead of us through Holy Week - calls us first to enter deeply into the darkness and suffering that we see around us, to give it all to the Man in front of us on the donkey – and to wait in prayer, trust and humility, as Jesus waited, for the outcome in God's good time.

*Let us pray:*

God of love and of creation, whose Son carried the brokenness of the world on the back of the donkey into Jerusalem, and onwards into betrayal, mockery and desertion, help us, we pray, to place our anguish at what is happening in the world today into the loving heart of Jesus as he carries it for us towards the cross. Help us to trust that your love reaches not only the sublime heights of Easter hope, but also the darkest depths of our sadness, brokenness and confusion. Help us to know your love in both lament and praise, and to live in trust and hope, walking with you as our strength and guide through all of our days. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord      Amen