

Sermon Notes Palm Sunday 2019
Ballina Anglicans The Rt Rev'd Dr Murray Harvey



US Garbage Truck Driver Craig Randall found a soft drink can in a pile of rubbish that had a competition sticker on the side. On peeling it off he found he had won a prize of US\$200,000. A treasure lifted from the garbage heap. A fortune found in the garbage of life.

Before being ordained, Episcopal Priest and Theologian Jesse Zink worked as a missionary in a shantytown community in South Africa. He had always wanted to work overseas and help to make the world a better place. His book entitled *Grace at the Garbage Dump*¹ speaks powerfully about the dire poverty, social exclusion and seemingly endless spiral of suffering caused by HIV Aids that imprisons some communities. Despite the ongoing suffering with no apparent solution, Zink speaks of the life-changing power of a ministry of presence in the hard places of life.

Palm Sunday is indeed a hard place. Maybe one that leaves us feeling strangely uncomfortable despite the cries of “hosanna!” [By Jesus time this term had come to mean “welcome”, but earlier had meant “save now” or “save us now” but which was only used to welcome kings or emperors who came in peace and goodwill]. In Jesus’ Passion God was lifting up salvation from the discarded things of life. By crucifixion, on the outskirts of the city, in the unlikeliest of places, God was making salvation known. This was a precious gift from an unlikely place; From the crowds, who at one time were shouting hosanna and later shouted “Crucify him!”; From the Judas Iscariots of the world, who would betray even an intimate friend for money; From those who conspired to murder him, and even set convicted criminals free in order to condemn an innocent

person. It was a garbage heap of betrayal, jealousy, corruption and greed that made the Cross necessary. And it is in such a context that the events of our salvation took place. And it is in the ministry of humble presence, in today's "garbage dump" of life, that this salvation is known through our communities.

"The ranks and emoluments of the world are to him no cause for joy, its punishments and shame no cause for disgrace" This could have been written about Jesus and his passion but in fact it is an ancient Taoist text by the philosopher Chuang Tzu² (a follower of Lao-Tzu the founder of Taoism). He is writing about the virtues of 'the truly great man'. Eastern culture is renowned for valuing humility as a virtue or personal characteristic. In contrast, in the Greco-Roman world humility or lowliness denoted a despised and abject condition that was to be avoided and looked down on. It was often a state of being that was thrust upon the person because of some failure or disaster, rather than being chosen.

The English word **humility** comes from the Latin root '*humilis*' (low or small). It was used to translate the Greek word used in today's Philippians reading (*tapeinosis*) which had a negative meaning in Greek culture. It meant subservience, subjection, poor-spiritedness or weakness. Paul however uses the word in a new way (Philippians 2 verses 3 and 8). According to him, Jesus 'humbled himself and thus was highly exalted'. Paul saw this act as the governing factor in the Christian life. He uses the word thirteen times in all. Each reinforces the belief that a humble self-emptying is not a weakness at all but something that creates room for God's grace.

As we stand at the beginning of this **Holy Week** this concept of humility is a way that we can make sense of all the events of the passion (or suffering and death) of Jesus. It gives us a theme by which to interpret each event and helps us to understand Jesus' behaviour at each point.

To briefly look more closely at the Philippians passage:

Verse 4. 'Look not to your own interests but to the interests of others'. That is, we must unseat any concern for ourselves as the driving force of life and replace it with a **practical concern for others**.

Verse 5. 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus'. We are to use the historic example of **Christ's selflessness as a model** (2 Cor 8:9; Rom 15:1-8).

Verse 6-11. This is a **hymn** composed probably in Aramaic and independently of the rest of the letter as a praise song to Christ's humility and exaltation (E.Lohmeyer, 1961). Verses 6-8 describe Christ's humility, verses 9-11 refer to his exaltation.

Verse 8. **Christ's death** was not simply the terminal point of his obedience but the inevitable consequence of being both fully human and fully obedient in a world alienated from God. Death on a cross (reserved for those who had forfeited all civil rights) was the extremity of human abasement.

Verse 9. 'Therefore God highly exalted him'. God's **grace** has full play where human will is **selfless**.

Apart from helping us to interpret the events of the passion in the light of Jesus' selflessness, there is a profound message here for how we should live our lives. Our old self must be emptied if we are to fully make way for God's grace. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes that using our God given **gifts** to the full helps to displace our own selfishness. Our self becomes fully absorbed by God's grace. This helps us be fully present for others in their need.

Paul summons his readers not only to understand the full significance of what Jesus Christ has done but to live out this same selfless attitude so that we can be **filled with God's grace**. As we reflect on the events liturgically recalled in Holy Week let us take time to see in each event something of Christ's humility, his emptying himself to make way completely for God's will and his concern for others even in the worst places of suffering. May we all be moved to adopt more humble lives and attitudes in order to make room, more and more, for God's grace.

+MA Harvey

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1. Jesse Zink, Grace at the Garbage Dump, Wipf and Stock, 2012.
2. Chuang Tzu in The Wisdom of China, Lin Yutang (Ed.), London, 1948.

Reflection

Douglas Adams in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* says there is an art to flying. The knack, he says, lies in 'learning how to throw yourself at the ground and miss'. When we speak of falling we rarely conceive of it in positive terms. Maybe that's why I've never been able to go Bungy Jumping! To fall is naturally dangerous. If we fall, we might get a broken bone or worse. The imagery translates to other situations. We speak of fallen leaders, fallen men, fallen women: all negative images. In the scriptures, The Fall ends the creation story in Genesis. A fall also begins the final chapters of our salvation story: Jesus falls on the Via Dolorosa.

The fear of falling, or failing, can prevent us from taking the journey. From getting off the ground in the first place. Yet failure is not the worst thing. Letting it defeat us is. It takes a special kind of wisdom and courage to face failure and defeat and to try to move on from this.

The human tendency to want to back a 'winner' is strong. What matters to God though is not success or failure but **faithfulness** on the journey. At the beginning of Holy Week we are reminded that Christians are called to follow a servant, not a winner. To follow the one who led not by dominating, but by **servicing**. The one who led not by triumphing, but by **sacrificing**. The one who led not by being the first on the podium, but by falling to the ground and dying. It is from here we rise. This week, perhaps above all others, we learn that as disciples we are to give ourselves fully to God – to fall **to** and **for** him. To die with him, so that we too might be raised.

