

- Well at least we're not going to have the problem of donkey poo on the church floor!
- Think back three months to New Year's Eve? Did you or anyone else foresee that we might be in lockdown today?
  - But for nearly all of us, it's getting much closer! Virtually all of us now know personally someone who has, or has had, the virus. Many of us know of someone who has died from it.
- We were caught napping, despite the writing being on the wall that it was bound to happen sometime.
- Do you think the disciples foresaw Palm Sunday, despite Jesus telling them at least three times in the preceding months that they were off to Jerusalem where he was going to suffer and die.
- Jesus was making an explicitly political statement. The donkey was vital. It was a sign. A sign that the king was arriving in Jerusalem in order to save his people.
  - It was all in the Old Testament that this was what was going to happen. As we heard, Zechariah the prophet foretold this. *'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*
  - Jesus clearly did this on purpose, and the people, sweating under the weight of Roman occupation would have understood. 'Look. I am the King. Salvation from tyranny is on its way!'
  - Just not salvation in any form anyone, even the disciples, was expecting. And the tyranny was not the Romans, but sin. The humanly created divide between man and God.
- So over the next five days, the cries of 'Hosanna - save us God', changed to 'Crucify him', and Jesus died according to God's extraordinary plan to save the world.
  - Jesus's sacrificial death showed the lengths God was prepared to go to, to prove his love for us. A love that overcomes all divides.
  - Jesus' extraordinary resurrection showed the victory of God over all tyranny, and disobedience, even the tyranny of sin and death.
  - So turn towards the cross and the empty tomb and acknowledge in wonder and joy what Jesus has done for you!
- Whether or not the disciples foresaw the events of Palm Sunday, it is much clearer how they responded to Jesus' death. And whether or not we foresaw something like the Corona virus, there are various options open to us about how we respond now.
  - Judas clearly decided Jesus was on completely the wrong track and decided to ditch him while he still had the opportunity.
  - Peter professed his undying loyalty. He blustered and snorted. He cut off the High priest's slave's right ear in a moment of fury but ultimately all his blustering proved empty words as he denied Jesus three times when he perhaps needed a friend most of all.
  - John hung back and watched from a distance. He was there at the foot of the cross but only as a passive observer, frozen, unable to help.
  - The evangelist Mark may well have been the young man who ran away naked from Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested, leaving his tunic behind him in the melee.
  - The other nine disciples just melted away as if their three years with Jesus meant nothing at all.
- None of which is terribly edifying!
- The Christian Church is faced with a similar dilemma in its reaction to the Corona virus. Sinful human beings that we are, we are faced with human selfish and cowardly desires. Put yourself first. Buy it whilst it's there. Go out in your car several times a day – nobody will ever know.
- But there is also an emphasis on altruistic humanity on the other hand. Shop for your neighbour. Sign up with the Baldock Community scheme. Support the Foodbank.

- There is also a third direction we can choose. If you've been receiving the daily emails from me, you will know I believe the Church has a prophetic role in the crisis, rather like the prophet Zechariah about Palm Sunday.
- Most people accept, at least to some extent, this viral infection and the speed at which it spread is a man-made problem. It spread so quickly because we travel so frequently. It spread so quickly because the world is over-populated – there are too many people living on this planet to sustain life for long. The way in which vast swathes of the world population don't seem to care for animal welfare enabled the virus to develop and flourish. And it's hard to dissociate ourselves from this. Someone who donates £20 to RSPCA in Hertfordshire is likely to buy a frozen chicken from the other side of the world if it is half the price of a home-produced one.
  - Could it be that the Corona spread of the Corona virus is directly linked to the way in which we care for the planet? Corona and climate change walking hand in hand.
  - I put it to you that the way the Church responds to this crisis will make or break our influence on society over the next generation or so.
- So here are some responses to corona modelled on the responses of the disciples to the death of Jesus.
- I'm sure some people will give up on God because he didn't keep us well and self-absorbed, searching for a different salvation than the one which corona virus is warning us about. Betraying the name of Jesus, like Judas.
- It's instructive that the notorious prisoner who was released instead of Jesus was also called Jesus. Pilate, with an impeccable use of English grammar asked the crowd '*Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?*'
- And you may know that the meaning of the name Jesus is 'God saves'. Two very similar sounding Saviours! Jesus and Jesus Barabbas. But offering radically different things
- Do you simply want a comfortable lifestyle and expect Jesus to answer your prayers and give it to you, or do you hope that society will change and we'll accept some different values and priorities which may not be comfortable but which will lead to life in the long term? Are you following the Saviour or following the robber? Are you tempted to give up on God because of the effect Corona is having on you and your family?
- Then there's the choice to preach loudly about the need to change our lifestyles and challenge everyone else to do it, but actually not change your way of life apart from tinkering at the edges a bit. That seems to me like Peter, whose blustering words were just so much hot air. Lord, save the church from this hypocritical attitude!
- Alternative we can be like John and stand silently grieving at the cross. Offer compassion to the bereaved, shop for the hungry, and do our best to cheer people up, while wringing our hands at the futility of it all. Oh well, people will say, the Church hasn't got any answers. It's just a group of do-gooders.
- And when it's all over maybe we can venture out of doors with a smile of relief and wait from everything to go back to normal, not realizing that like Mark we are looking nakedly foolish and cowardly and no different from anyone else. Running away from the challenge.
- Or, worst of all, we can just totally disintegrate like the fellowship of the other nine disciples, flee the scene and wait like frightened men quaking in our boots to see what will happen next. Saying nothing at all, let alone anything worth hearing.
- Alternatively we can try to live more coherently and positively. We may not understand why Corona is happening. The disciples didn't have much clue in Holy Week. But if we can, not just preach a Gospel of judgement and compassion, but also live by it as well, then when people are looking for answers and direction in the middle of confusion and at a time when many of their hopes and certainties are being knocked from beneath their feet we can model a different way. A different response. Not just compassion. But a way of life that has different priorities and makes sacrifices in order to offer hope to a wounded planet. It's instructive that in the Passion narrative of Jesus, when Jesus was standing before Pilate, his judge, he answered only three words and those three words flung the imperative back on Pilate to decide rather than being words which protested Jesus' innocence. 'You say so.' At his moment of crisis he led by example rather than by force of argument.
- So how do you respond to the cross?
- And how do you want to respond to Corona? And what are you going to do about it?