

Reading: Matthew 21:1-11

Prayer

Today we gather, along with millions of other Christians throughout the world, at the beginning of Holy Week. It is called Holy Week because within it we revisit the core of our Christian faith, the command to love. We see God's love for us on the cross and we experience the resurrection, the power of God's love. Today we act out Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. On Wednesday we gather to recall the shadows that lengthen around Jesus, shadows that will eventually lead to his death. On Holy Thursday we remember the Eucharist that he gave us and relive the foot washing. Then on Friday, a day we dare to call good, we recall Jesus suffering with us and for us in the most horrendous death on a cross. And then, on Easter morning, we gather again to hear the astonishing news of his rising again. It is a real roller coaster ride of emotions. One minute the crowd is yelling "Hosanna" and proclaiming him King, the next he is betrayed with a kiss. Peter can't seem to own up to being his friend and lastly, even Jesus himself, feels betrayed and broken as he cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

It's all very intense. Really, wouldn't it just be easier to miss out this week, after all, we already know how the story ends. We could all go on a trip to Hanmer instead. And to be sure, many Christians do just that. They happily meet from Sunday to Sunday and miss out all the bits in between. I even heard of one congregation, at their AGM, voting to have the vicar not do, as they said, "all the messy bits in between." So why bother to go to all this trouble to keep this week as Holy?

Let me answer by way of illustration. Some of you know I suffer from allergies to dogs. It's no small thing. If I enter a house with a dog, even if the dog isn't there, my eyes go red, they run and pretty soon I have an asthma attack. I try to keep it quiet because a lot of people take it as an affront to the cleanliness of their house. But I do keep an antihistamine with me at all times.

When our first grandchild was born, I had a problem because her family also has a dog. Either it was miss out on seeing her, or only meet her outside the house, never to stay over. Anyway, our nurse daughter came up with a solution. The Riccarton Allergy Clinic. They have given me a vial called Oraltek, a sublingual spray. It is made of *essence of dog* and by spraying this under my tongue my body is slowly recovering from the allergy. And it is working too. The other day the dog was able to lick me all over the face with no side effects, although the dog had to lie down afterwards! This little taster of dog is healing me.

We gather this Holy Week to get a little taster of what Jesus went through. By getting a taste of what he did on our behalf, we are brought to healing. We join him in the garden to know something of his betrayal and loneliness. This in turn begins to heal our times of betrayal and loneliness. We experience again the washing of the disciples' feet and taste

something of the humility of a God who would kneel at the feet of his friends. This taster heals us of our ego driven lives. We watch on as he experiences terrible suffering: being whipped, humiliated, spat on, mocked, and then tortured to death, and we begin to be healed of all those times we have suffered. As we hear his cry of abandonment, we are healed of those times we have felt abandoned by God. And as we experience again his resurrection, we are healed of the grief we carry for all those we love who have died and we experience healing from our own fear of death.

The people of God have always known the healing power of a taster. Moses in the desert, when the people of God had been bitten by snakes, put a snake on a pole so that all who looked at what had poisoned them were healed. When we gaze on the cross of Christ and see Jesus, we are given a way through our greatest fears and hope is restored. This is what John meant when he wrote that when Jesus is lifted up, he will draw all people to himself. Isaiah wrote some 2600 years ago of a mysterious figure called the suffering servant: "by his wounds we have been healed." Christians have come to see Isaiah's words fulfilled in Jesus, our Suffering Servant. Like a vaccine made from some of the disease, this Holy Week holds out the promise of healing from our suffering, hope in our loneliness, meaning in our confusion.

We need this week because in the world and in our lives, we continue to face suffering and violence and meaninglessness. And we all need healing in some way.

This week we gather not to remember but to relive the events of this week because through them we find healing.

The story is told of an old, paralyzed grandfather. He was asked by his grandchildren to tell the story of a famous rabbi that he knew. Sitting in his wheelchair the old man started into the story, but it wasn't long before the grandfather was recalling how the rabbi used to jump up and down and dance when he was praying. Being swept up in the fervour of the narrative, the grandfather, much to the surprise of the children, himself stood up and began to jump and dance to show how the master had done it. By telling the story so completely the old man was himself healed.

This week I will continue to put my sublingual immunotherapy under my tongue and, who knows, one day I might even be able to have a dog of my own. But my prayer for us this week is that, by entering into the story of this Holy Week, we all get a small taste of what Jesus went through so that we too are healed and brought to wholeness.

Let us pray...

O master carpenter of Nazareth,  
Who through wood and nails didst work our whole salvation,  
Wield well your tools in this, your workshop,  
That we who come to you rough hewn.  
May, by your hand, be fashioned into a truer beauty and  
a greater likeness of you, our Saviour Jesus Christ.  
Amen