

On the threshold of Holy Week ...

... Should I stay, or should I go?

A sermon given on Palm Sunday, 10th April 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 1:56

So on Palm Sunday, we are standing on the threshold of Holy Week. And in the midst of all the unfolding events of the coming days, you could say that the story of Holy Week boils down to two choices being made: choices about whether to stay or about whether to go. On the one hand, there is the choice made by Jesus, the Son of God, to stay and not to go. It's the choice revealed in Jesus's decision to enter Jerusalem publicly on a donkey, echoing the humility of the triumphant King foretold by the prophet Zechariah, and in the process throwing down the gauntlet to all the earthly powers in that city. It's the choice tested in Gethsemane when Jesus said to his Father, "Not what I want, but what you want." And it's the choice underlined when Jesus rebukes Peter for wielding a sword, saying, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of Angels?" Again and again, it seems Jesus has the opportunity to turn away, to escape, or to resist. But instead of going, he stays and accepts his fate, willing to walk the way of the cross out of obedience to his Father and out of love for his people.

On the other hand, there is also a choice being made by the Father to allow the Son to go and not ask him to stay in the safety and security of heaven. It's a choice made in the conceiving of a child in Mary by the Holy Spirit. It's a choice made in the anointing of Jesus at his baptism, when the Holy Spirit came upon him as a Dove and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" - launching Jesus on his Ministry. It's a choice made to leave Jesus dying on the cross, even crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The Father chooses not to insist that the Son should stay, but rather he lets the son go. And the result is that death becomes part of the experience of the Godhead, as the relationship between Father and Son is ruptured on the cross.

I wonder what choices you face this Holy Week? Are there any situations where you are tempted to back off, to keep your distance, to protect yourself or even run away, when God is actually asking you to stay? Or are there people you love, people you

want to protect, to keep near, to defend from difficulty or pain or even risk, but whom God is actually asking you to release and let go? I wonder how that question affects you this week - should I stay or should I go?

In the gospel story, we see different characters responding in different ways: at the Last Supper, Judas goes when he might have stayed and remained loyal to Jesus; in Gethsemane Jesus invited his disciples to stay with him, to stay awake, to watch and pray - but they can't keep it up and they escape into sleep; at the cross, all the disciples run away - they go except for the women, who stay at the foot of the cross, resisting the desire to try and protect themselves from the pain of what is going on. In these little episodes we may choose to see ourselves: little decisions leading to loyalty or betrayal; faithfulness or defensiveness; giving or self-protection.

This Palm Sunday, the King is coming, the time is drawing near; the Kingdom is dawning.

So what is it to be? Shall I stay or shall I go?

Passion Text

Matthew 27:1-56

1 When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death.

2 They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

3 When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders.

4 He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself."

5 Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.

6 But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money."

7 After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners.

8 For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.

9 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price,

10 and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so."

12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer.

13 Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?"

14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

15 Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted.

16 At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas.

17 So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?"

18 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.

19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him."

20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed.

21 The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas."

22 Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!"

23 Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

24 So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."

25 Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

26 So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him.

28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,

29 and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

30 They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head.

31 After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

32 As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.

33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull),

34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots;

36 then they sat down there and kept watch over him.

37 Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.

39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads

40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying,

42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.

43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son.'" "

44 The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah."

48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink.

49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."

50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.

52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.

53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

55 Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him.

56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.