

Sermon for Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, Year C, 10 April 2022
St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia
The Reverend Martin Johnson
Isaiah 50.4-9a; Psalm 31.19-18; Philippians 2.5-11; Luke 19.28-40.

Theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, used to have a poster on his office door at Duke University. It displayed a haunting image of two people in grief holding one another, and underneath the image were these words: *A Modest Proposal for Peace: Let the Christians of the world agree that they will not kill each other.* Hauerwas would claim it a *modest proposal* – we've got to start somewhere.

At the beginning of the liturgy this morning we heard the words: 'Today we come together with the Church throughout the world...' This is only partially true; our Orthodox brothers and sisters will celebrate the triumphal arrival of Jesus next Sunday, they are one week behind us this year. And in thinking of the Orthodox we naturally look to the ecclesiastical East and our thoughts are drawn to the conflict in the Ukraine, and two Christian, largely Orthodox nations at war. How can this be?

Clearly throughout his ministry Jesus was aware of the mounting pressure to proclaim him king, for him to mount some sort of coup against the Romans. In John's gospel immediately following the feeding of the 5,000 we read: "Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself." This pressure is relieved when Jesus arrives triumphal into Jerusalem; his followers finally proclaim him king. The Palm branches of victory are waved. Finally Jesus allows himself to be taken by force and made a king; but he is a king like no other.

The force initially is that of the police guided by Judas, a friend of Jesus. Psalm 41 is being fulfilled lived out: Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted: who shared my bread, has lifted his heel against me. This is the tragedy of Ukraine, Christians, Orthodox, Slavonic peoples with shared history and heritage, at war. This has been the tragedy of so many conflicts, peoples of the same tribe at odds. John wrote in the prologue to his gospel: He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. Jesus is taken by force, his kingship comes about through lies, betrayal, contempt, abuse and extreme violence, much of it from his own. The Palms of victory are turned into crosses. How can this be?

The Church say Hauerwas is God's alternative to war. If this is so then the greatest of blasphemies is being played out: the justification of the loss of life and the destruction of property to bring peace and unity is sacrilegious. The message of today is one that flies in the face of any such thinking. We need no sermonising to hear and grasp the message of Isaiah's servant song and St Paul's hymn to the Philippians. They both speak powerfully of our calling to humility, to be at one with the God who in Christ demonstrates today and during the week the true nature of authority and true religion.

Rowan Williams, himself a scholar of Russian literature and spirituality said there was a centuries-old tradition of Holy Russia, the imagination of a nation identifying as a suffering servant, always marginalised, invaded, defeated, oppressed — a sort of Christ-like people.

This is deeply rooted in Russian culture and is something that the Russian leadership is using in its justification to the Russian people. Williams writes: "looking at the situation at the moment, faced with a naked act of aggression, and unrestrained indiscriminate slaughter of civilians. Anything less Christ-like is hard to imagine, and yet that narrative is there."

The suffering servant: marginalised, oppressed, defeated, we need only to reflect on the passage from Isaiah and on Psalm 31 to see how in the Christian imagination we have

understood these texts as prophetic, speaking of Christ. Christ as the suffering servant, as the embodiment of a new Israel however does not lash out but is submissive and in this way victory is secured. The Palm is a sign of victory, it is turned into a cross by the violence and division of the world, but it is turned back into *the* symbol of victory. This is our faith, victory assured in a way that still today we can barely conceive. And yet the hope of the cross is a persistent one and in the call for us to look upon it and face down the violence of the world is to be found our salvation.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . . the alternative is not worth contemplating. Amen.