

SERMON BY NIGEL WILLIS AT ST GEORGE'S, PARKTOWN

PALM SUNDAY 29 MARCH 2026

Readings

Isaiah 50: 4-9a The Lord God has opened my ear

Psalms 31:9-18 May your face shine upon me

Philippians 2: 5-11 Act with humility

Matthew 26:14-27:66 The Institution of the Lord's Supper

Passover and Easter

Today is Palm Sunday. We celebrate Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Riding on a donkey, he had come to celebrate the Jewish festival of Passover. In most calendar years, Easter and Passover align with one another but because the Jews, like the Muslims, follow a lunar rather than a solar calendar, every now and then the alignment gets out of kilter. This year, the two festivals overlap. They are 'in phase' with one another.

Easter and Passover occur in relation to a full moon. In the mainstream churches, Easter Day is always the first Sunday after the full moon occurring on or after 21st March. In Islam, Eid-ul-Fitr occurs upon the sighting of a new moon. This is why Ramadan ended about ten days ago.

Almost universally observed among the Jewish people, Passover was, as it still is, one of the greatest festivals in their religious calendar. Families came together. Just about everyone in the community came to town. The festival commemorates their liberation from Egypt. The celebration affirms their beliefs in family, identity, and the importance of freedom, the hopeful longing for it as well as the promise of it.

The people waved palm leaves for Jesus as he came to Jerusalem. In those days, among the Jewish people, this was a sign of the recognition of an heroic leader. The waving of palms was a symbol of joy and, importantly for us, a belief in the victory of the spirit of God over mortality.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus was a paladin among the Jewish people. He was seen as a miracle worker, a superstar. Was he perhaps the promised messiah?

Five days later, he was crucified. On the Sunday following his crucifixion on the Friday, a small Jewish following of his, a fringe-group, a sect, if you like, came into being. It was to grow in size to be the greatest religion in the world. Certainly, in terms of numbers, this is true.

Passover is known among the Jewish people as Pesach. For them, it is an eight-day commemoration. The story of the Passover appears in the book of Exodus. (Chapters 7 to 13.) The Jewish people had, for a long time, lived as slaves under of the Egyptian pharaohs. God told their leader, Moses, to go to Pharaoh and say to him: 'Let my people go!' Pharaoh refused to listen to them.

God then brought Egypt ten devastating plagues, destroying livestock and crops. God decided that the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from that of Pharaoh himself to the prisoner in the dungeon and of all livestock would be struck down.

Moses instructed the Jewish people to slaughter a lamb (the Paschal lamb) and to smear its blood the lintel and doorposts at their front doors. This was a sign to God that the spirit of death was to pass over those doors, sparing the firstborn among the Jewish people. This is how the festival came to be known as 'Passover.'

In desperation, Pharaoh let the Jewish people go, chasing them away with their flocks and herds. They were to leave in such a hurry that the bread which they had baked to take along as food for the first days of their exodus from Egypt did not have time to rise. This is why, at the Passover festival and when we take bread at holy communion, we eat biscuit-like unleavened bread. Wine was drunk as part of the celebration, as we do at communion.

The final festival meal on the eighth day of Passover is the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It is called the *Seudat Mashiah* (Feast of Messiah).

While the great stories of the OT contain a core of truth, they were embellished over time, as they were told and retold, again and again, over hundreds of years, before being written down. They were neither fiction nor lies but were stories telling the

listeners large moral truths. This is a view which I have heard being shared by the former Chief Rabbi of South Africa, Cyril Harris.

This is also the view of some very distinguished Anglican theologians of our times, like Sir John Polkinghorne, the physicist-and-theologian, who died recently and the Most Revd Dr Rowan Williams, widely acclaimed as the most intellectual Archbishop of Canterbury in the last century or so.

Aside from the parables, it is much the same with the NT, except that we do know, for certain, that Jesus of Nazareth was a real, historical person, was crucified, dead and buried and that on 'the third day' something extraordinary happened, giving rise to our religion.

It seems to me that, the extraordinary thing is that, at the very least, the early disciples, aflame with intensity, came to the realisation that death is not 'the end'; that God, as Spirit, lives on and, now and always, is with us in in the life, teaching and continuing presence of Jesus, as Spirit. The oft-encountered bogeyman of death is transformed into a new, liberating, awareness of what life is really all about. This, I understand, is also the view of Polkinghorne and Williams.

In his *God with Us* (SPCK, 2012), Williams makes the point that, if one reads the gospels carefully, the Resurrection was an event that was more than a concept grasped by the first disciples; it was more than an emotional or psychological experience.

The great contribution of Williams to contemporary theology is that we can leave our belief in the Resurrection at that. It is not imperative for us to have a very specific idea as to what, precisely, the Resurrection was. What matters is that we believe in the transformative power of the continuing presence of Jesus in our lives. And all of us have experienced that.

In other words, we are not called upon to believe in the impossible but to be humble in our understanding of God. We believe in the Resurrection, even though we uncertain as to its precise details. In the same book, Williams makes the point that Christian theology is not granite-like in its veracity but is fluid. He says that, paradoxically, the cross does not stand still. That is for sure! Look around! The cross is almost everywhere!

In my opinion, when it comes to the Resurrection, this contribution of Williams to contemporary Christian theology is huge. Doubtters and non-believers will accept, as I have said, that Jesus of Nazareth was a real, historical person and that he was crucified, dead and buried. But when it comes to the Resurrection, people will say: 'But how can you expect me to believe that?' When one explains that we do not believe that he was a revived corpse, they will retort with something like this: 'Well, then, what do you believe?' If one says there was a 'eureka moment,' this helps a lot but does not adequately explain how it came about that a small, frightened, demoralised, not particularly well-educated group of people were transformed into the first disciples of a great world religion.

Crossing the arc from Jesus's crucifixion to an awareness that to billions of people around the world, he is and has been always present, guiding, comforting, teaching, showing the way, all day and every day, may indeed be difficult for many.

But Williams assists us. We can legitimately say: 'Something happened. We are not too sure of the details. We catch glimpses of it. We call this the Resurrection. For now, "we see through a glass darkly". Belief in the Resurrection transforms our lives. For me, this is good enough.' In other words, one proceeds, with faith, on the basis of objective, evidence-based, facts.

Palm Sunday is a day in the Christian calendar that is rich in symbolism. Rowan Williams, like so many other Christian theologians, contends that Holy Communion does not make sense unless one believes in the Resurrection. Otherwise, the eucharist is simply some kind of memorial meal and of an overwhelmingly sad event at that.

Although the eucharist evokes the memory of the Last Supper, it is much more than a memorial. It is a reminder of our belief in the victory over death, that we are invited to share a meal with God himself, that we are a community, that we are a family. (Rowan Williams *Being Christian* (Eerdmanns 2014, p45-6.))

This is why holy communion is not a mere ritual, some kind of hocus-pocus. Partaking thereof is a hugely affirming event, in which we increase our sense of who we are, of what we believe and of our sense of community.

The link with the Jewish festival of Passover reminds us of the origins of our faith and the promise of our delivery from slavery. In the first eucharistic prayer of holy communion in our Anglican Prayer Book, we proclaim that, through Jesus, we are delivered from 'the slavery of sin.' In our service of communion, the priest, in the prayers of absolution, calls on God to set us free from our sins.

Salvation from sin

As Fr Matthew Wright reminded is in two recent sermons delivered here, sin is not so much about things like giving in to the temptation to have that delicious chocolate after lunch. It is about separation from God.

When separated from God, we easily get trapped into worshipping the wrong things, like power and wealth for their own sake. And the curse of the past 150 years or so, ideology. Power, wealth and a coherent set of political beliefs are necessary for human progress, but God comes first. Remember the sequence at the beginning of the ten commandments. Just look at the headlines grabbin the news around the world today. Who can deny that so much of the world's present tragedy derives from a Godless sense of being, or being 'lost to God', especially among a number of the rulers of the world? It oozes from their every pore.

For us, as Christians, the reason is clear: Jesus said that you cannot love God but treat your fellow human beings with contempt. We affirm that principle at almost every service of Holy Communion. I shall have more to say about his later.

To comment on a topical issue in the media right now, is not the sexual exploitation of young women an act of profound disrespect for fellow human beings and, correspondingly, of God himself?

A recurring theme in the teachings of Jesus is that a grasp of paradox is critically important in our journey of faith. A ready reminder of this fact is the saying of Jesus that: 'The first shall be last and the last shall be first.' (Matthew 20:16). This, btw, is the reason that the priest presiding at a service of our church enters the building last.

Palm Sunday is also a day when we reflect on the importance of both prophecy and symbolism. The two are hugely important in our religion.

In Zechariah (9:9), it is said: 'Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, riding on a donkey.'

Jesus, the king of kings and lord of lords, rides triumphantly into town, not, like Napoleon, on the back of a magnificent steed but a donkey. Our relationship with donkeys is paradoxical too. We love them but feel sorry for them and also regard them with a degree of contempt. They are beasts of burden.

The contradiction is captured very well in G.K. Chesterton's famous poem, *The Donkey*. It is a deeply religious *tour de force*.

The extra eighth day of the Passover festival is known as *Acharon Shel Pesach* (The Last Day of Passover). It is devoted to the Messiah (*HaMashiach*).

Deeply aware of the prophecy of Zechariah, Jesus inverts it, making it come true. Enormously subtle, as so often, he is telling the people that he is 'the one', the king of kings and lord of lords, the Messiah.

The genius of the prophet Zechariah is that he understood that whoever would become the king of kings and lord of lords, not just for a lifetime but for the rest of history, would have to be a person of extraordinary humility, the kind of person who, by choice, would ride a donkey, rather than a horse, in a moment of triumph.

God and the paradox of the power of the cross

A further irony in the story of Palm Sunday is that Jesus becomes the Paschal lamb, the sacrificial lamb, the 'lamb of God'. Quite why God allowed Jesus to be sacrificed in this way has been a matter of much theological debate. The different propositions are known as 'Theories of Atonement.'

My view is simple: we could not have had a world religion, with Jesus at its centre, without the crucifixion and the events that followed in its wake. It is as uncomplicated as that. Without the 'giving up' or sacrifice of Jesus's life on the cross (and his subsequent Resurrection), billions of people, past and present, would not have had the transforming moral leadership of our faith in him – the leadership away from sin. In this way, Jesus became a 'sacrifice for our sins'.

Rowan Williams, in his *God with Us*, makes the point that, in the OT, sacrifice was closely linked to the concept of atonement, which is coextensive with recognising God and being obedient to God, of being 'at one' with God, being reconciled with God. Williams says that 'God-in-Jesus' gives us the example of what is meant by complete obedience and supreme sacrifice.

Williams reminds us of the potent theological insight of Peter Abelard, the great 12th century theologian and philosopher from France. Abelard is perhaps most renowned for his great love of and sexual desire for Héloïse, who later became an abbess. Much written about, the story has even been dramatised as a play, written by Ronald Millar. It became a box office hit in London and on Broadway, New York in the 1970's. Enthralled and impressionable, I saw a performance of it as a young man. It made *Romeo and Juliet* seem like a walk around the lake on a Sunday afternoon. This great love story may one day be the subject of another sermon of mine.

Abelard contended that, paradoxically, the cross is a sign of God's power and freedom. The cross is a sign that God-in-Jesus says to us: 'You can do what you like with me, but you can't stop me from loving you!' The idea is at least latent in Paul's letter to the Romans (5:8).

Once one 'gets' this – and I confess that it took me a long time to do so – one has one of the best proofs of the existence of God. The lawyers here today may prefer the phrase 'arguments for' to 'proofs of'. The scientists may prefer the expression 'signals of transcendence'. My sisters and my brothers, ours indeed a powerful religion! What great minds have gone before us!

How come things changed so dramatically from Jesus being a hero of the people, only to be crucified at the behest of their leaders a few days later?

Facile explanations tend to say that it just goes to show how fickle the people were. Yes, human beings are fickle but it seems to me there has to be a deeper explanation. It may have to do with the messianic concept. We all know that the ancient Jews were looking for a different kind of messiah from the one that we got. They were looking more for political than spiritual leadership.

But Jesus himself and Paul seem to have thought that, more than the Jews, the Gentiles were in need of spiritual leadership. Spiritually, the Gentiles, particularly those

living within the Roman Empire, were in a very bad way at that time. Think of Jesus saying: 'I have come not to change the law but to complete it.' (Matthew 5:17) Paul, in his letter to the Romans, writes: 'Has God rejected his people (the Jews)? By no means!' (Romans 11:1.) Paul also reminds us that God's covenants with the Jews and their receiving of the law will remain forever (Romans 4: 9).

Monotheism and the Messianic concept

If the ancient Jews had accepted Jesus as the Messiah, he would have been a national and not a world leader, one who would be king of kings and lord of lords, across all nations and for all time. Jesus came to save the world and not a single nation.

Paradoxically, on the other hand, Christianity would have been an abject failure without its Jewish roots. For this reason, it was essential that the founder of our religion and the first disciples should have been Jewish. However great it may have been, a ministry of three years, preaching and healing people, would have been insufficient to create a religion having the power of ours.

Jesus himself said: 'Salvation is from the Jews.' (John 4:22).

Moreover, the astonishing progress of the world, over the past two thousand years, would not have been possible without monotheism. Where else would this progress have come from, except Judaism? We tend to forget the truly revolutionary character of a belief in a there being a single, over-arching, logical, moral mind, an intelligence that is not imaginary but real and original, at work in the universe. The idea took thousands of years looking at the stars, talking around campfires, in the desert, and reading and writing to develop. Like almost everything else that is excellent in the world, Christianity stands on the shoulders of those who have gone before.

And, as I enquired in my last sermon, what about the great stories of the OT that tell us so much about ourselves, our relationships with others and with God?

Then again, paradoxically, because of Jesus's Great Commission, appearing in all four gospels and in Acts, ours is a catholic faith. (See, Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-47; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). The doors of our religion are open to all, including Jews who may want to convert.

So, Palm Sunday is about much more than waving palms in respect, admiration and adoration of Jesus. Palm Sunday helps to prepare us for the crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus.

Our Catholic belief in peace and goodwill to all

My sisters and my brothers, at this time of desperately tragic turmoil in the world, I am mindful that, in the Anglican church, we expect the clergy to provide spiritual and moral leadership on the big issues of our times. We are not spiritual ostriches burying our heads in the sands of purely private morality. I have always admired our church for that – even though it has made mistakes along the way.

It is trite that wars have unintended consequences. Various top political commentators around the world have drawn our attention to the fact that, although we have been appalled at the bombing of Iran (as we are of the bombing of Gaza and the Ukraine), there may, ironically, have been a ‘silver lining’ in the saturation news over a long period of time about the behaviour of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. It has made it plain for all to see that the government of that country is neither representative of nor the prototype of Muslims around the world. For what it is worth, that is my own view as well. The religious views of the IRG are a perversion of Islam, not the embodiment of truth.

For some 47 years, the ‘politically correct’ have, almost universally, been wary of being outspokenly critical of the Revolutionary Guard and its leadership for fear of seeming to be religiously prejudiced or bigoted. Today, it is clear that the overwhelmingly Muslim countries of Azerbaijan, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and others want to live in peace and harmony with us, the rest of the world who follow other religious traditions or none. This opens windows of opportunity for good.

Prophecy and South Africanism

My sisters and my brothers, only morally blind fools will deny that the future of our planet depends upon our living together in a spirit of religious tolerance and mutual respect. This is what we South Africans believe in and practice every day. And therein lies our call to prophetic witness in the world right now. We South Africans believe in peace. We have a prophetic duty to be a continuing example of religious tolerance to

the world. And, dare I say so, to provide leadership on the issue? Lest I be misunderstood on the issue, let me make clear that I am referring to religious tolerance, not the replication of a political solution. A lasting political solution in the Middle East will be much more difficult than ending apartheid but you have to start somewhere. You begin by looking at one another in the eye and recognising your shared humanity.

An end to war

And the great project that awaits future generations, many of whom are here today, is the demilitarisation of the world leading, ultimately, to disarmament. This would be replaced by a high standard of living and quality of life for all. Yes, all – every human being. Unquestionably, it will be difficult, but it is ‘do-able’. If that affable conservative, Ronald Reagan, could believe that this is ‘the way to go’, why not the rest of us?

A shared communion of faith, hope and love

In my last sermon, I had the privilege and honour of extending, on behalf of you all, our congratulations to the Most Reverend and Right Honourable Dame Sarah Mullally on her confirmation as Archbishop of Canterbury in Westminster Abbey, which had taken place on the Wednesday before. At this sermon I have a similar privilege and honour of sending her our congratulations on her magnificent installation this Wednesday past. It took place in that enormously powerful spiritual home, Canterbury Cathedral itself. It predates Chaucer. The Archbishop of Canterbury is our *prima inter pares*.

I am sure that those who, like me, watched the ceremony will confirm that it was superb! I was so proud our church! Liturgically, the service was unmistakably Anglican. Hymns that we all know like *Praise my soul, the King of Heaven*, *Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord* and *All people that on Earth do dwell* were sung. There was African and Urdu music and dancing.

What was especially uplifting to the soul was the powerful, almost overwhelming, sense that the shared humanity of us all was being affirmed ‘with trumpets blaring’. Every race and religion in the world was there for all the world to see. Several Catholic cardinals congratulated her warmly! A rabbi and an imam were there, chatting away like old school pals. There were Buddhist, Sikh and Hindu leaders present. Lutheran,

Greek Orthodox and Coptic religious leaders were there too. And of course, Anglican prelates from the different provinces of the church, throughout the world, came out in force. Our own dear Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, was there too, of course.

Did you know that Mexico has a vibrant Anglican church? Did you know that their presiding bishop is a woman, the Most Reverend Alba Sally Sue Hernández Garcia? I didn't until Wednesday. She read the gospel lesson in Spanish, *nogal* (untranslatable South African English, taken from Afrikaans)!

I began thinking to myself: 'I am beginning to understand "speaking in tongues" so much better.' I understood what she was reading. I am cheating a little because the reading was of the famous passage telling the story of the Annunciation to Mary.

The person who presided at the installation and led it was the Dean of the Cathedral, the Very Reverend Dr David Monteith, who is openly gay and lives with another man in a civil union.

The Pope, far from separating his church from ours still further by reason of our having chosen to have a woman as our spiritual head, sent a warm message of good wishes both to the new Archbishop of Canterbury and the world-wide Anglican communion, calling for increased dialogue between us and a drawing closer together in unity. And, can you believe it, in April, the Archbishop is to visit the Pope at the Vatican, as his invited guest?

As the Archbishop said in her powerful and inspiring sermon, delivered from the Chair of St Augustine, there are huge forces for good in the world. We must work together to ensure that this goodness prevails. She made it clear that the warmth of the embrace of our church extends beyond those of other religious faiths. The outreach includes those of no faith at all.

The Archbishop of Canterbury's installation has had two important collateral consequences, which I think I should mention today, being Palm Sunday. The first is that, instead of giving it a skip or a mere few seconds of broadcast time, the BBC decided to broadcast the entire event, recognising 'the vital role of religion in people's lives'. The second is that the Prince and Princess of Wales, who attended the ceremony as representatives of the King and Queen, have had some enormously

positive discussions about religion with the Archbishop as part of their preparation for the ceremony.

In the result, the Prince of Wales has come 'out of the closet,' admitting that he had been a 'doubter' but, over time, had become a 'believer', with a 'quiet and steady faith'. How is that for influence? What the Archbishop and the Prince say and do matters very much indeed.

My sisters and my brothers, something big and good is happening. As Holy Week begins, let us draw strength and courage from the fact that billions of good people around the world are affirming that, despite our differences, we want to live in peace and harmony together. Let us praise the Lord!

Christianity is not about to be cast on to the scrapheap of history. The spiritual pathology of the world cries out for the kind of moral leadership and depth that Christianity provides.

Palm Sunday brings together a sense of our own mortality, our frailties, our weaknesses, our contradictions, our sinfulness, our dreams that have been disappointed but also the promise that it shall all be glorious in the end and that, despite the terrible brokenness around us, we have reason to be thankful for the many blessings in our lives! God opens our ears and makes his face to shine upon us!

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen