

# Sermons at Christ Church

## A rise, for the task is yours, take courage and do it.

Palm Sunday

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

*Merciful Savior who gave yourself freely that we may find our way home, may you never quiet our hearts in our search for the path that leads home, where we belong. Amen.*

This beautiful space in which we worship and pray sits still and quiet. Apart from Adam and myself, there's no other human sound in this beautiful and holy space. It is somber and quiet. The quietness stands in sharp contrast to the sounds and shouts of 'Hosanna, Hosanna. Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven! Sounds and shouts that fill this holy space every Palm Sunday. What happened?

Many of the people who shouted hosannas two thousand years ago took down branches of trees, spread their garments on the way while they shouted. Today, our hosannas are muted. We can't raise our palms together in joy, we cannot shout nor sing hosannas together. Not because we don't want to, but because we cannot, even if we so strongly desire. Because of COVID-19, our hosannas are muted.

Amid our muted hosannas, we begin Holy Week- a season which highlights human contradictions. Even our muted hosannas are a contradiction because we can't restrain ourselves from shouting crucify him.

At the heart of who we are is a chasm-a disconnect with our own selves, a shade of darkness that leads us to wander away from home. For that reason we can be merciful and merciless with the same people, loving and callous with the same people we love, we can hug and stab those we call friends, we can lift people up and bring them down at the same time. We can be good and evil at the same time-often with little hesitation because we have the capacity to sing hosanna and shout crucify him at the same time-human contradictions.

The passion journey begins for me our initial steps towards the discovery of our deepest contradictions, more importantly, the blessing of knowing that unlike humpty dumpty, we can yet be put together again for the glory of God, that our innate contradictions are not enough, for the Easter story overshadows all our fault-lines. The Easter story leads us home.

Today, we mark the story of Jesus who rides a donkey into a dark tunnel. It is the tunnel of human contradictions. You and I are also walking in a dark tunnel-it is the same tunnel of fear, betrayal, anger, envy, callousness, brutality, war, sickness and even death. We can feel the darkness surround us like never before. Our present predicament of battling COVID-19 exacerbates this feeling of fear and darkness. We can see the Easter light, but from a distance. How far are we from this light? We don't know, but we are called to inch ever closer to it-for that is where home is.

In a few days, our songs of hosannas, even the muted hosannas will fade away as we betray Jesus. Yes, a friend with whom he walked the dusty highways, broke bread and drank from the same cup, and saw him offer words of comfort and healing to the distressed, sold him for thirty pieces of silver-human contradiction. Judas thought that the Savior of the world was worth that much. He thought that his friendship with the Lord was worth anything material. Remember the day when your trust was broken? Remember the day when those you trusted as friends, those with whom you broke bread, to whom you were loyal felt that their loyalty amounted to nothing? I was once betrayed by a friend of thirty years and I couldn't believe he could sacrifice our friendship. Human contradictions.

There was another friend who promised to be there for Jesus. He was the one who called him the Messiah. He was the Rock upon which the church would be built. He had even promised to stay with him through thick and thin. He had vowed to offer his own life for the sake of the one who offers abundant life. And when he was confronted with the reality of his betrayal, he didn't believe it until it happened. The one who was willing to offer his life for the author of life couldn't even take the accusations of a poor little maid servant. Life in the tunnel, where we see nothing but darkness. Human contradictions. Yours and mine.

Paul captures the scourge of human contradiction in this way, "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing." Life in the tunnel of contradictions approaches its peak when we find ourselves in our own gardens of Gethsemane. Remember, in that Garden, Jesus was confronted with the choice, his will or God's will. As difficult a choice as that was, his response was simple, not my will but thy will. Not my will but God's will be done. Our contradictions reaches their peak when we find ourselves in our gardens of Gethsemane, where we are confronted with the question of choice-our will or God's will-that which I want to do but I do not, or that which I do not want to do but I do.

It is for this reason Paul that encourages us to let that same mind which was in Christ Jesus be in us-a mind that pursues the will of God. That mind is set free from the burdens of human contradictions. Those who have the mind of Christ know that life in the tunnel is dark, scary, gloomy and menacing but are not daunted because they do see a flicker of light so far away, but also very near. In the midst of darkness, they gravitate towards the light.

See, the height of human contradiction is betrayal. Nothing hurts more than knowing that a friend you trusted with your life betrayed you. Nothing demoralizes than knowing that the institutions you trusted to protect you have to ration ventilators in order to save lives. I thought every life was worth saving-what happened? Nothing kills the human spirit than knowing that the people you trusted gave up on you when you least expected. But this is all too possible because we're a people in a tunnel, where we see nothing but a kind of darkness shaped by human contradictions.

In a few days, the muted shouts of hosanna, the song of blessings with which we greeted the king of life will give way to wrath, anger, jealousy and hatred. We will deliver to be crucified the one person who doesn't hold within himself any of the darkness of our contradictions. We will deliver to be crucified that one person who the darkness of life in the tunnel cannot contain.

Our shouts of hosanna have turned sour as we scream crucify him, crucify him. But Pilate wasn't amused and so he asked repeatedly, what evil has he done? Which of the darkness of human contradictions does he carry? Why must he be crucified? We couldn't answer him. We drowned his questions with our shouts of crucify him because we had no answers, and we have had no answers ever since.

The problem is when you find yourself in life's tunnel, when you are covered by the utter darkness of the tunnel, nothing matters. Life loses its meaning. Life loses its depth. Life loses its substance and purpose.

And so we will deliver to be crucified him who knew no sin but emptied himself to die on the cross. This act of love was not to appease a blood thirsty God nor was it a token of forgiveness, but an expression of the profundity of love itself.

I learned that if forgiveness needs to be paid for, then that forgiveness lacks authenticity. Love and forgiveness must be freely given or else they cannot accomplish the transformation and healing that they seek.

Remember this, to love is to give yourself away-and God has fallen in love with you, so much in love with you that He was willing to give Himself away. It is for this reason that he sent His son into the world to lead you out of the darkness of human contradiction in the tunnel and bring you home, where you belong.

Although we may be surrounded by darkness, light is much closer than it seems. And the more we inch closer to that light the more we recognize the impermanence of dark contradictions- and that as attractive as darkness may be, it lasts but for a moment. The more we inch closer to the light, the more we come to appreciate the power of light over darkness.

As dark as the tunnel may be, and as muted as our songs may be, we can walk with the abiding hope that God holds our contradictions together. For our glory lies in that bright sunlight that appears at the end of the tunnel-that Easter light. Abiding in the dark tunnel isn't enough because God's desire is for you to come home to the light, where you belong. Even with our muted hosannas, come let's walk out of the dark tunnel into the sunlight of God's Easter glory. Amen.