

Sunday 5th April Palm Sunday

Saint Aidan

St Aidan was an Irish Scot. His name means flame or Torch. He brought the flame of faith in Northern England and was a monk of Iona. In 635 Oswald King of Northumbria requested that a missionary be sent from Iona to evangelise his kingdom. The missionary returned and declared that the Northumbrians were so stubborn and barbaric that he had been unable to do anything with them. Aidan expressed the view that the missionary had been too direct and unrelenting in his approach. His brethren were so impressed that Aidan was consecrated a bishop and was sent to Oswald to have a go himself. He made his base on the Island of Lindisfarne. With the help of the King and several Irish missionaries, lots of progress was made, churches were built and monasteries established and a school for the training of ministers among whom was Chad the first Bishop of Lichfield. Aidan travelled extensively almost always on foot. It is said that he did not hesitate to rebuke the haughty and powerful but was tender when comforting the afflicted and feeding the poor. Aidan was struck down by illness in 651 after he had been Bishop for 16 years. His body was taken to Lindisfarne and buried there. He was greatly admired by Venerable Bede for his holy living and apostolic life. His feast day is 31 August

Sermon – Matthew 21: 1-11

On Thursday 26th March just before 8pm, I opened the lounge window and heard in the distance the sound of clapping. As I stood there I started to clap and each house in our small street opened their windows and front doors and joined in. The sound got louder and louder as more and more joined us. As it slowly died down, we had experienced a wonderful thing the love of the community showing at this time their admiration and love for all those in the NHS and those who support us in many ways in this time of trial. Their act of love gives us hope, for they are not giving up. They are getting sick themselves and many are returning to work when recovered and continuing heroically for us all. Unlike in Jerusalem, we knew what we were clapping for. Our enthusiastic public praise was the only way we could show our thanks to those who have put their lives on the line.

There was a lot of noise that first “Palm Sunday” when Jesus rode into Jerusalem – people shouting at the tops of their voices. “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Jesus’ journey was a very significant one because it directly fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy.

There had been signs all the time that Jesus was the Messiah but this was more than a sign. Those who knew their scriptures knew that the King, the son of David, would ride into Jerusalem on a colt the foal of a donkey. And so it happened exactly as the scriptures foretold. As the little donkey stepped out on the greenery and the bruised sap scented the air, the crowd went wild, following Jesus, following each other, shouting and chanting in praise. The processions slowly wound down the Olivet Road, across the Kidron and up to the towering walls of Jerusalem. But there was confusion too – when they reached the city, people started asking “Who in earth is this?”, “What’s going on?” The people of the city are told that this is the prophet Jesus of Nazareth, from up North in Galilee. The Northerner has come to question the south, the countryman has come to take over the city, the prophet has come to confront the established authority, while in the Temple the well established bureau-de-change conducted its business with equal preoccupation and enterprise.

You might wonder what was in Jesus' heart as he made his journey. He knew the shallowness of much of the praise. He understood that many of the people who were proclaiming him the King in fact just happened to be there that day and were caught up in the crowd and he knew that this ride was in fact a ride towards his death and that this same crowd that praised him, would in a couple of days' time, be shouting for his crucifixion with just the same ignorance and lack of understanding. The majesty and triumph of the moment was laced for him with fear and sadness at the pain towards which he was journeying. Perhaps at one level he fervently wished that things could be different. For he was human and most of us try to avoid pain not to walk into it. But there was no turning back and even if there had been a way out, Jesus would not have taken it. His mind was set on what was ahead for he was motivated by love. While this week of all weeks, we need to remember his pain and his suffering we must not lose sight of the reason for it. When Jesus looked round at all those people shouting his praise, he loved them. Every single one of them. Even the ones who hated him.

When Jesus looks around at all of us, he loves us, in all our confusion, all our weakness and lack of sincerity – he loves us. Love was the reason why he was willing to walk into the hands of those who hated and misunderstood him so much that they wanted to murder him. Love was the reason why there was no turning back for Jesus.

Everybody failed Jesus, even the ones who loved him the most. Matthew tells us that all the disciples deserted him, one betrayed him with a kiss, another denied him with curses. Confused with fight or flight their fear made his decision. His family did not understand him. His community disowned him and the authorities killed him. But despite all that Jesus went on loving passionately. Jesus had a grand passion, one that consumes his whole person and drives him through this time of horror. He could have avoided coming south to Jerusalem, he could have compromised and settled for survival, but the passion that is in him is grander than his need for security and survival. He is a passionate man. His ardent love insists that he face the ultimate test of love. The Cross.

The cross of Jesus stands at the centre of the Christian story as the sign of the lengths love will go to in its passion for others. If we ever wonder if we are really loved, we should look at that figure on the cross. It is difficult to maintain that we are unloved when we know that someone thought we were worth dying for. The cross is lifted up as a sign of our worth. Somebody thought we were worth all that pain and suffering and that somebody is Jesus son of God.

We honour his death as the supreme act of love. The love of one who "did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself" to become as we are and as we show that, in spite of our sins and stupidities, God loves us. Because of such love, the people who had failed him were given new beginnings and hope as we see the triumph of love over death and failure.

Take hold of Christ's love for you this week and let it take root in your hearts so that as we follow his journey to the cross in private, not together, we may truly celebrate the joy of Easter.