

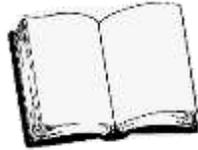
Sunday after Easter

On this Sunday after Easter we can reflect on the expectations that were at play in the events leading up to Easter and the expectations that drive us. But God is a God of surprises and we need to listen to God's story with humble hearts.

Tell me the stories of Jesus....

*Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear;
Things I would ask Him to tell me If He were here:
Scenes by the wayside, tales of the sea,
Stories of Jesus, tell them to me.*

William H. Parker (1885)



We typically talk about the *Easter story*; in the Gospels we see how the disciples, the crowds, the temple hierarchy and the Roman authorities all saw events through their expectations, the stories they told themselves, and how these drove their actions. And expectations and stories are still driving us today, especially with the coronavirus pandemic all round us.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus's entry to Jerusalem, the story seemed obvious: a great leader riding in at the head of a conquering army, sweeping all before him, restoring Israel's independence and the best of David's and Solomon's reigns. Perhaps the cleansing of the temple met other expectations: restoration of justice and national purification, or at least vengeance on profiteers and Roman collaborators.

Another expectation: Thomas saying 'Well, we may as well go and die with him' when disciples feared going to Jerusalem.

And the negative story expectations of the temple hierarchy at their best: another hothead who would bring down all the destruction

Rome could visit. At the worst: a rival for their place between the people and God.

We bring expectations and stories to the pandemic: *It will be like dystopian fiction, civilisation will collapse and we'll all die*; or *oh, it will just turn out to be another false alarm like all the others*. Either, despair or false confidence, often leads us to actions that make the situation worse.

The disciples knew the Passover story. They knew what to expect of a Master, of a great rabbi, of a priest-king. He'd recognise their service, reward faithful followers with plum jobs. But instead Jesus took the role of a menial slave and washed their feet.

And the Garden, and Jesus' arrest changed the triumphant story to one of despair and defeat, with the hope of that angelic army fading fast. The heroes of Jesus' triumph, future government ministers, the men who would die with him, were frightened men in hiding.

How many of the Palm Sunday crowd didn't shout for crucifixion, but hid at home, barricaded behind workbenches, terrified of the mob and what the Romans might do before killing them? And what story did the mob think was going on? Some no doubt hooligans, glad of any violence; others hired hands 'doing their job'; perhaps some genuinely fearing blasphemy and resulting danger.

The story about last-minute rescue and ultimate triumph never happens.

But there's another unexpected story: one that resonates today. At the moment of complete despair, some of the women closest to Jesus and John stay to the bitter end. They can't **do** anything, they can't stop it, they can only show their love by being there. We hear of grieving families, distressed that they were kept from a dying father, mother, brother, sister.... deepening their grief.

And it's the women, fulfilling the expectation that they, unclean ones, wash and prepare the body, who experience the unexpected, the impossible story: the tomb is empty, Jesus appears and speaks to them, he is no longer in the tomb.

Who can blame the men for disbelieving the women's story? It's over, the tragedy is complete, everything is lost. They're hysterical women who can't accept reality. Thomas doesn't dare **hope** this new story is true without physical proof. But once again God in Jesus upsets expectations and writes a new story.

We are still, too often, driven by our expectations and the stories we make about the world and events around us. *I'm young, I won't get this, I can picnic in the park with my friends, it's ok.* It's a conspiracy/ G5/ escaped bioweapon/ punishment from God. *It's all exaggerated, people must get back to work to save the economy.* Just follow my diet plan/ take these tablets, you'll be safe.

And the stories we and others tell about Jesus: *Angry God needed to punish us all, but Jesus took it instead.* It's only a myth. *God will be pleased and specially protect us if we meet in hundreds for Easter—you can't get sick at church.* I don't care—I'm too intelligent to believe this religion nonsense. *Palm Sunday and Easter, the triumph story, that's what we preach.*

First and foremost, we need to listen to God's story with humble hearts and not impose our own.

Readings for this Sunday: *Psalm 16. 1-2, 11; John 20.19-31; Acts 2.32* (Peter's witness)

One of many wonderful performances of *I know that my Redeemer liveth*, Sylvia McNair, The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kg7aXEvCeXY>

We know that our Redeemer lives: live in our hearts, Lord Jesus.

We pray for all the many people around the world who are sick, sometimes dying alone in isolation. May they know Your presence and be comforted. We pray for families unable to offer comfort and company, for health workers from consultants to cleaners who daily risk their lives. We pray for people whose treatment has been delayed.

We pray for families stressed by lockdown, people out of work, people whose world is suddenly insecure. We pray for shopworkers, delivery drivers, binmen, teachers still at school, everyone asked to put themselves at risk to keep public essentials going. We pray for people whose big events won't happen or will be delayed: exam sitters, graduates, university candidates, job seekers, families with weddings, funerals, christenings, reunions disrupted.

We pray for members of national and local government, asking that they will make the best decisions in the circumstances. We pray for people already in danger from poverty, war, civil unrest, lack of health care, even more endangered by the pandemic.

We know that our Redeemer lives; live in our hearts, Lord Jesus, and teach us Your story to share with others. Amen

