

Rev. Joan Pell
Ipswich Methodist Circuit
Sermon: 5th April, 2020
Series: Stand-Alone
Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11. 26:36-46



Drawing Strength for What Lies Ahead



A few weeks ago before we had to self-isolate, I visited Framlingham Castle. It reminded me of Psalm 46 and the imagery of God as our refuge and strength. Or as Isaac Watts penned, 'A Mighty Fortress is our God'. This castle has stood for centuries. It is so strong and well built that it has withstood the weathering and neglect, and over the centuries has been a refuge and place of protection for many. In God, we can find our refuge and strength. As I was preparing for Holy Week and re-reading the Passion Story again, **I wondered how Jesus had the strength to go through the last week of his life.**



While we talk about Jesus being fully divine, we also have to remember that Jesus was fully human. He felt things exactly as we do. **Where did he get the strength to face what lay ahead of him? Where do we get the strength to face this pandemic** or any other difficult time that we have to walk through? What sustains us through the dark moments?

We'll read and hear the full story of the passion on Friday, but for today, I'll assume you know the story well enough for me to touch on some of the bits that we have not just read.

While I know that this is not true of you all, most of you have been a part of Chantry, LR or MS for many years, and a part of another church before you came to your current church. You've been a Christian for a long time. Many of you were even raised in the faith as young children. Jesus had been a Jew all of his life. Luke tells us that at eight days old he was circumcised as Jewish boys were at that time. And that his parents took him to the Temple in Jerusalem to present him to the Lord and offer a sacrifice. So, Jesus too, was raised in the faith. Sometimes, as we have been surrounded by these things for so long, we do things automatically and do not realize perhaps the gifts that our faith offers, or we fail to these things because we take life for granted. So let's take a look at what Jesus did to sustain his faith and give him strength.



ONE. We began today with the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus understood his life's calling as fulfilling the scriptures, as existed in his time, or what we know today as the OT or Hebrew Scriptures. So, he rode into town on a donkey, fulfilling a prophecy made by Zechariah. Donkeys were common animals for carrying people and heavy loads. So, it probably was not

unusual to see a man on a donkey riding into town. But, the people were pleased to see Jesus, and they rooted for him, and encouraged him. And it turned into a parade.



Have you ever been to a parade? In the United States, we had several parades each year. There was a Christmas Light parade, a Independence Day, a Veteran's Day parade and children's sports parades, like for the opening of Baseball season and ethnic celebrations like Mardi Gras or Chinese New year. They were fun times. Lots of waving and shouting. Encouragement was offered. Approval given. And laughter too. Times that the community came together around a common theme.



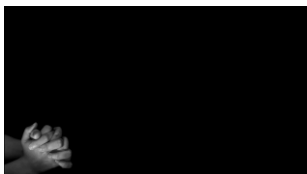
There were also parades like Pride Day Parade, where a group of people that has traditionally been opposed come together and walk happily and proudly through town, cheered on by the many watchers, and booed by others. But they gain strength from being together in community and seeing the support that they do have. And that then sees them through the tougher times.



I don't know if Jesus planned to draw a crowd that day, or just enter town quietly with the disciples. But, I am sure that Jesus drew strength from the crowd and from the happiness, laughter and support that he received.

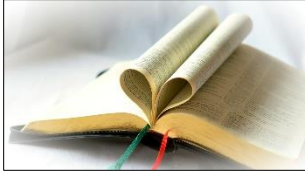
So, draw strength yourselves, from looking back and remembering the times when as a community we have laughed with each other and celebrated together and encouraged each other. Perhaps you even kept some old letters or cards, that you can pull out and re-read. Maybe you can send someone a card of encouragement and a memory. We need community.

I'm loving these 8 p.m. Thursdays of standing on the doorstep and clapping for the NHS. Almost our whole street was outside, carefully staying on our own doorsteps, but you could hear the applause echoing up and down the road.



TWO. We have our spiritual practices. Prayer is one of them. There are many examples of Jesus retreating to pray in the gospels. One, we have just heard about, in the Garden of Gethsemane. He took the disciples with him, but then retreated to pray alone. It can't have been a quick prayer because the disciples had time to fall asleep!

We often use the excuse that we do not have the time to spend in prayer. Jesus made it a priority, even on the night when he was arrested. And we have been given this gift of time right now. So use it to deepen your prayer life. If you need any suggestions, then call me.



THREE. Jesus knew the scriptures. Time and again, we see Jesus quoting the scriptures. He even quotes Psalm 22 while on the cross. Many of the Psalms are lament Psalms, where the Psalmist cries out in agony to God. But they always finish with a statement of trust in God's faithfulness. They make a good starting point for our prayers.

The scripture we have memorized, whether word for word, or just the gist of it, will sustain us when things get tough. Think about the passages you know that you can bring to mind. Most of us I am sure can recite the 23rd Psalm, and be filled with the reassurance that God is like a shepherd caring for us in the deep dark valleys. Look up your favorite passages, and write them out. Stick them around the house where you will see them.

Reading scripture is a spiritual practice, and there is always for message for us in what we read. Matthew is our lectionary gospel for the year. Spend some time this holy week reading through it and contemplating what God wants you to hear.



FOUR. Jesus drew strength from his faith rituals. As a good Jew, Jesus celebrated the Passover, which is a time when the Jews remember how God saved the Israelites from slavery and led them into the Promised Land. So it is fitting that the last meal that he had with his disciples was the Passover meal, where he then instituted the very first Communion as he broke the bread and blessed the wine.

Celebrating communion is also a spiritual practice that draws us closer to God and Jesus and one another, as we remember the sacrifice that Jesus made and God's grace and mercy for us all. The rituals of the faith sustain us. We will eat together on Thursday this week and again on Easter Day, as we share a love feast, unfortunately not in person, but across the sound waves, and in communion with the saints through all times and ages.



FIVE. Jesus followed the path that he understood as the one that God wanted him to walk. He knew the scriptures. He understood what he was being called to do; what in his life, loving the Lord our God, with all his heart, mind, soul and strength meant. He'd read the prophets and their calls on our lives. He challenged the status-quo and offered healing and forgiveness and a way of peace and called for justice for all. And he was not going to back down from doing what was right whatever the cost.

I'm reminded of all the essential workers right now, who are putting their lives, and their families, on the line, as they selflessly seek to help in all the ways they can.

And Jesus knew that not everyone would think what he was doing was the right way to proceed. He knew would be betrayed, but undergirded by faith and the belief in his

mission, he continued anyway. And he still offered forgiveness and compassion, to those who hurt him.

God's love for Jesus and Jesus' love for us, gave him a purpose and the strength to continue. He trusted in God's faithfulness and that in time, resurrection would happen,



May we too have that same confidence. As we go through this pandemic, may we love the Lord our God, with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and find our purpose by offering compassion and mercy and encouragement to others in all the ways that are available to us.

Your Christian life to this point will also carry you through the days ahead. You know how to do this. You are a disciple of Jesus. A pupil of Jesus. Your spiritual practices will carry you through.

- Gain strength from the community.
- Pray.
- Draw from the Scriptures.
- Commune together – virtually!
- Follow God's calling on your life.

As the Psalmist said, *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble.*

Thanks be to God,
Amen.