

## St Columba's United Reformed Church, Cambridge

Palm Sunday  
25<sup>th</sup> March 2018

### SERMON

*Mark 11.7-11a; Mark 14.1-15.47; Ephesians 3.14-21*

On this unique day, I am inspired by thinking of the founders of this church in 1879. In a moment when we rightly look back to them with gratitude, if we want truly to honour the spirit and faith of their pioneering work, we cannot simply preserve their legacy and give up on the pioneering. The very thing for which we honour them was that they changed for their times. They saw how the University of Cambridge was evolving, admitting students and staff from traditions other than the Church of England, and to meet the consequent arrival of significant numbers of Scots, they established a church of Presbyterian hue. That's their sign-reading, risk-taking example to us, to change for *our* times of such political and social upheaval and religious diversity, such human self-sufficiency and evangelical atheism. Our task is as important and urgent as ever it was, but the context has altered requiring of us a re-imagined profile and programme. As one theologian has it, 'We can learn from the past, but we cannot live there.' Put like that, perhaps we can see how the church is a movement, not a museum.

In a sense, that is where the first of today's themes took us. Palm Sunday was about Jesus journeying to Jerusalem in pursuit of doing the purpose of God. Those who were enthralled by him journeyed, too, beside him. 'Hosanna', they cried – at once, a shout of commitment to him and a plea for help from him. And as we are on a journey, is there not something in 'Hosanna' that we can borrow? We can believe profoundly that it is right for us to be on the move by uniting with Emmanuel, we can be excited by the opportunities that it presents for a new generation of serving God's mission in this city, *and yet* be exercised by what an unknown future holds. So, *our* Hosanna, too, becomes a shout of commitment to Christ and a plea for help from Christ.

If you read *Reflections*, you will see that I have found in its seventeen articles several characteristics of St Columba's church, chiefly worship, fellowship, care and outreach. In combining a focus upon the Word of God and both the sacraments, this morning's service reminds us of what the Reformers of old called the 'marks of the true church'. Whilst various theologians down the years have identified several pre-requisites of an authentic church, John Calvin was clear – there are just these two: Word and Sacraments. So, what about The Word? Ultimately, of course, what we are doing is because of what we believe. In Mark's account of the Passion we heard Christianity's defining narrative. St Paul sums it up, '*he made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave ... he humbled himself, and was obedient even to the point of death, death on a cross.*' (Philippians 2.7) That story, with its denouement of the resurrection, was the backdrop against which everything was done at St Columba's start. As it has been read year by year, so it has continued to inform and inspire the worship and work of this church for a century and a half. And it is the motive for both Emmanuel's and St Columba's step of faith as we unite into Downing Place United Reformed Church. Seen aright, this decision, which can feel costly, is a response to the humility and obedience of Christ as he strove to do what he believed God required of him.

And what about the Sacraments – those visible signs of God's invisible grace at work in the world and in us? Rowan Williams says that in **Baptism**, we 'recover the humanity that God first intended' and at the **Eucharist**, '... Jesus Christ tells us that he wants our company'.<sup>1</sup> So, in Eucharist we are offered communion with God and with each other, and in Baptism, we are commissioned for the Christian life of knowing we are loved by God and of enabling others to know that, too. Our celebration of both baptism and Eucharist on this exceptional occasion, therefore, is more telling than simply 'it's what we do'. To morph from one chapter of our life into another by observing both the dominical sacraments is at once a profound summing up of what St Columba's has been, and a signal of what we intend to remain: in communion with one another and commissioned for service. That is not a truculent word of resistance. Rather, it is a commitment that in the world, we aspire to bear – by God's grace - the marks of the church, for the sake of the world and for the glory of God. Let it be so. Hosanna!

N. P. Uden, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2018

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, Rowan 2014 *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* London: SPCK pages 4 and 411