

Reflections in Solitude — Week 2

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Earlier this week, Avril and I noticed a ute and trailer full of peculiar greenery parked in front of the church. “Looks like corn harvest,” I said in jest, recalling my days on the farm. Then, as we stepped to look more closely, at the same moment we recognised the

fruit of Council workers doing their annual trim of the palm trees.

“Oh...” we sighed together in recognition. This year there will be no need for palm branches in local churches, no joyful “Hosanna!” reprieve in our Lenten worship. Palm Sunday will be observed differently this Lent.

This year, it is especially difficult to imagine the crowd gathered in Jerusalem, not just because of the distance in time between ourselves and the Gospel setting, but because of the social distancing that has silenced crowds across Australia for now.

In John’s telling of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (John 12:12–19), it is those who witnessed the raising of Lazarus who made up the crowd that day. The evangelist notes that the disciples did not understand “these things” at first, but they will later. The Pharisees, on the other hand, take note of the people and say to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

I’m heartened and inspired by the Pharisees’ observation. It speaks of a devotion that is strong and resilient. The people know full-well the risk and danger into which Jesus is riding. The threat is real, the tension is high, yet they have experienced the signs of God’s love which Jesus revealed and have come to believe. Nothing can diminish their praise. Perhaps their courage might speak to us at this time.

When the effects of the Coronavirus reached Australian shores, Church leaders began to offer guidance to the Ministers and Congregations in their care. In the Uniting Church, we received emails from the Synod, helping us interpret what the evolving government restrictions meant in our local context. In one correspondence, the word “exciting” was used to describe the possibilities for ministry during the pandemic—a word I find insipid at times, especially now.

On the flip side, an Anglican Church leader offered prayer points including a petition for God to end the Coronavirus in Australia. If only it were that simple! was my initial reaction—simplistic, in fact, in its cause-and-effect view of God, prayer and the Christian life. This seems even more obvious as we take our first steps into Holy Week and remember the Passion of Christ that revealed a God who is at work *in and with* human suffering.

My critique is tempered by the awareness that I am not in a position where I need to offer direction and a pastoral word to a large group of believers across the theological and contextual spectrum—thank goodness! But the crowd in John’s Gospel does cause me to wonder if something more might be on offer for us than the encouragement to feel *excited despite* or to pray for an *escape from* the realities we face.



It occurs to me that what inspired the crowd’s praise that day was the personal encounter they had with God in Jesus. They saw the great love Jesus has for his friends in his tears over the death of Lazarus. They heard Jesus declare, “I am the resurrection and the life,” and with Mary and Martha, were invited to believe. Then they saw God’s power bring life out of death.

The experience that day filled the beloved community with hope and trust for the future. They—and we—cannot eliminate risk and danger completely. Though the nature of the threat and challenge will change, such things are part of life and loving, as is suffering itself.

But as I was reminded recently, crisis equals danger plus opportunity. And while I wouldn't use the word "exciting" to describe the opportunities before us in this crisis, I do live in hope that these weeks and months can strengthen our faith and love.

For example, with the logistics of our social interactions stripped back—no dinner parties, no grandparent outings, no backyard barbies—might the human exchanges we do have become more intense and precious? It's just you and another on the other side of the phone or screen. Likewise, a warm and genuine greeting can bridge the 1.5 meters of distance in the shops and between neighbours.

Another example is how the restrictions to gather make it impossible to cruise through worship passively, allowing others to carry us along with their singing and prayer as our hearts and minds wander off to shopping lists, an upcoming golf outing or footy game, or perhaps worse, analysing and critiquing the "worship performance" of others. Instead, this time invites us to be even more intentional about (and responsible for) the practices that sustain our relationship with God. What will it look like for you, personally, to set aside time to rest in God? to attend to deep and lasting things, holding them before the light of Christ and the Gospel for insight?

In my estimation, the situation in which we find ourselves brings the possibility of discovering God at work in ways we may have previously overlooked. We have been slowed down. We have been forced into greater quiet and stillness. In our solitude and the remaking of life's patterns, may we encounter the One who comes to love the world and, in our daily experience of this love, have the courage to praise in the midst of the risk and tension.

Dear God,

I so much want to be in control.
I want to be the master
of my own destiny.

Still I know that you are saying:
"Let me take you by the hand
and lead you.
Accept my love
and trust
that where I will bring you,
the deepest desires
of your heart will be fulfilled."

Lord, open my hands
to receive your gift of love.
Amen.

—Henri Nouwen

