

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera, QLD

17th March 2024 – Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12:20-33

DOWN AND UP IN GLORY

‘It just got real’. Have you ever heard those words before? Have you ever used that phrase before? In what kind of context or situation might a saying like that be used? At this time of the year when our two major footy codes here in Australia are beginning their seasons, after months of training, strengthening, planning, teams find out as they begin playing real games against each other if they are actually as good as they think they are. It might be a thought we have or words we say when after months of planning the moving truck arrives to take us away from the home we know to somewhere new. After waiting nine months for the birth of a child we might have that thought in a kind of a panic when we bring our child home for the first time and the realisation hits that we are responsible for this child’s care, growth, and development. Perhaps it is a thought we might have on our wedding day, or as we walk into a new job. ‘It just got real’; after a time of preparation, perhaps for months or even years, the event for which we have been planning and preparing has arrived, and even if we have been looking forward to it we can still have feelings of nervousness, or even doubt.

It just got real. I am sure that’s what Jesus is thinking at the time our reading for today is set. This reading happens during Holy Week, the days leading up to Good Friday. Not long before this Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, a deed which no doubt got people talking about Him. And then, to play around with our heads a bit, even though we celebrate Palm Sunday next week, Jesus has entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey just before today’s reading. And for Jesus, knowing that in just a few days He was heading for His death on the cross, it all must have felt very real. He knew what was behind all these events. He was there for the thousands of years of prophecies and promises God had been making to His people that He would send a Saviour to suffer and die for them so they could be forgiven and come back to God. Throughout the 33 years of His earthly life Jesus knew that this week and its ending was where His life was headed. But now, it’s here, and from things

He says here and elsewhere we know Jesus had very human struggles with this. After so many thousands of years of preparations, it has suddenly got very real.

At this time then, probably on either the evening of Palm Sunday or the following Monday morning, two Greeks approach two of the disciples and say they want to meet with Jesus. As Jesus approaches His death and resurrection the circle gets wider; more and more of those outside the people of Israel are wanting to know about Him as Saviour. But what kind of Jesus do they want to see? Remember, it's soon after Lazarus is brought back from the dead, and immediately after Jesus is triumphantly welcomed into Jerusalem as a king. So, what kind of Jesus do we think they are wanting to meet? The one who will suffer and die, giving up His life for others? Or the triumphant victor, the powerful leader whose bandwagon everyone will want to be on? Were they wanting to meet and follow the One for whom glory is both a down and an up road?

Jesus' response? If it's all starting to get real for Jesus, with thousands of years of promises and 33 years of earthly life quickly approaching their God planned climax, Jesus sets out to make sure that everyone else knows it's getting real also, and, most importantly, just what 'real' is. Although He can call the dead out from their tomb to be alive again, although He is hailed coming into Jerusalem as a king in the line of the great King David, Jesus knows that His path to glory involves going down, and then up. That's what is real. The road laid down for Jesus to walk was not an easy road for Him to take. The devil wanted Him to take the easy path, but Jesus didn't because He knew it wouldn't work, for us. For our forgiveness, for our new life, for our being strengthened in the lives we now lead, Jesus knew He had to take the road which is real; the road on the downs and the ups of glory.

What does this real road which Jesus took mean for us then? Following Jesus is a good road, but it's not always a glory road. But it is a road which brings God's love for us into the realness of our lives. Because of Jesus, when the harshness of life gets real for us, we know God is there with us. Before He called Lazarus out of the tomb, the shortest verse in the Bible tells us that Jesus wept for the death of His friend. We do suffer the realities of losing loved ones in our lives, of our mortality

getting real, and Jesus going through downs and ups shows us that He is with us in these times. Jesus' path and obedience to God's plan also shows us that the new life He talked about when He raised Lazarus is also there for each one of us who looks to Him. That's real. Real also for us is that when we struggle in any part of our lives; in our relationships, in our meaning and purpose, in providing for our families and ourselves, in following and trusting God, in our worries for ourselves and our loved ones, in any of these things, what is real is that because in Jesus the glory of God came right down to us and among us we know that God is with us in all these times, that we can bring them to Him, find comfort and strength in Him. When things get hard for us, in many ways that's when the love of God gets real.

Real also is not just the path which Jesus is saying here that He must follow, but also the path He calls His followers to take. The path of giving up ourselves, serving Him; like the grain of wheat being prepared to give up everything so that we can grow in His Kingdom and His love. What are we called to give up as we take this path of down and up? Our pride. All those tempting, attractive, things/events/even people which get in the way of our relationship with God; not that we can't still enjoy them, but our call is to honestly look at them and consider if we use them in service of God, or allow them to replace Him. Our selfishness, wanting to put ourselves first. Greed. Our reluctance to forgive and move forward. Only each one of us personally knows if these are things which control us, or if we control them, and most importantly if and how they get in the way of our relationship with God, and of how He wants us to serve Him and treat others. When we really look at the call Jesus gives to all those who want to meet Him, to know Him, to follow Him, what this call involves then also gets real for us in our lives.

The two Greek visitors to Jerusalem came to the disciples asking to meet Jesus, and the answer Jesus gives talks about the downs and the ups of His path to glory, both for Him and His followers. When we look at it, it might seem harsh, even impossible, and if we look at it as something we need to fully reflect and live out in order to receive God's love and forgiveness then we might well think it is an unrealistic road for us to follow. But we need to look at the cross through the empty tomb.

We need to be prepared to see Jesus as He is, not as how we want or expect Him to be. And this is the Jesus we are called to share also with others; the One who is real, who is with us in the downs and the ups of life. And the way for us to do that, and it is challenging, is to give up all those things of ourselves which don't show and reflect the love and the forgiveness which He wants to share with the world. It is through us, His followers, that the love of God in Jesus now becomes real for the world.

As we now head towards Easter, the culmination of thousands of years of God's planning and preparation to bring all people back to Him, as we also prepare to look at Jesus suffering and dying on the cross, and then rising to new life on Easter Sunday, we can also think, in amazement and thankfulness; 'Wow, it just got real!' By taking the road of going down and up in glory, Jesus has made God's love and all He offers very real for us. We can now thank and praise God for that, and ask Him to help us to make it real in our lives too. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Can you think of any situations in which you have either said or thought, 'it just got real'? Was this in relation to good things happening, or bad, or both?
- How do you think Jesus was feeling as the realness of His suffering was now approaching? What do we know about His thoughts during this week before His death? What does the fact Jesus still went through with this say about His obedience to God and His love for us?
- In Jesus we know that God's love is real for us in the realness of our lives. Is there any time you have especially felt this? Are you feeling this regarding a situation you are faced with right now? Or perhaps, do you sometimes struggle to feel or experience the love of God in the downs of your life?
- Think about the real call Jesus gives to His followers, us, in this reading. What are you being called to give up, or at least to reposition or reprioritise so it no longer comes between you and God? Bring anything you are struggling with to God and ask for His help in being real in following Him.

Pray: thank God that Jesus went through the downs and the ups for us on His way to glory, and for the very real love and forgiveness this now brings into our lives each day. Ask God to help us to be real in how we follow Him so that others can come to see and know this love also.

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