

**Palm Sunday – What God needs**

*Psalm 119:19-24; Luke 19:28-40*

If you've ever flown to North America, as you watch the flight tracking screen, when you fly over Newfoundland, you may have noticed a place called Gander. When I was in London last weekend I went to see a production of a musical, *Come From Away* that tells a powerful story about what happened in that town during the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Gander is a town located in the north-eastern part of the island of Newfoundland. It is the site of Gander International Airport, once an important refuelling stop for transatlantic aircraft, and still a preferred emergency landing point for aircraft facing on-board medical or security issues.

On the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the townsfolk of Gander describe life in Newfoundland and how they learned of the terrorist attacks taking place in the United States. The attacks resulted in US airspace being closed, forcing thirty eight international aircraft being diverted and landing unexpectedly at Gander airport, doubling the population of the small Newfoundland town. The Gander townspeople spring into action and prepare to house, feed, clothe and comfort nearly seven thousand passengers (along with nineteen animals in cargo). Meanwhile the pilots, flight attendants and passengers are initially not permitted to leave the plains, forcing them to deal with the confusing and conflicting information about what happened and why they were suddenly grounded.

Once allowed off the planes and transferred to various emergency shelters around the town the passengers and air crew watch replays of the attacks and learned what happened. Lonely and frightened, they desperately try to contact their families and pray for loved ones. The townsfolk work through the night to provide for every possible need in any way they can. The travellers are initially taken aback by their hosts' uncommon hospitality, but slowly they let their guards down and begin to bond with the quirky locals and each other. The townspeople of Gander and surrounding communities open up their homes to the 'plane people', regardless of their guests'

race, nationality or sexual orientation. Two women discover they are mothers of fire-fighters, but one of their sons is missing at Ground Zero, and we discover he died there.

There is an underlying faith element in the musical and at one point Christians, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs find places of worship around the town to pray. It reminded me in the early days of my ministry here in September 2001 where we opened this church for prayer and reflection, and many people came.

As the musical moves on, relationships are formed, and break up. Hope is found, and lost. One Muslim passenger, treated with respect generally, is still subject to suspicion by the American authorities. Eventually the restrictions are lifted and passengers and crew fly home, exchanging the stories of immense kindness and generosity that was shown to them by Newfoundland strangers.

Ten years later the crew and passengers, the 'come from away' of the once stranded planes reunite in Gander, this time by choice, to celebrate the life long friendships and strong connections they formed despite the terrorist attacks. The Mayor of the Gander says, "Tonight we honour what was lost, but we also commemorate what was found." Audiences and critics have received the musical as a cathartic reminder of the deep capacity for human kindness in even the darkest times, and the triumph of humanity over every kind of hate.

By God, we need it just as much today.

As I watched the musical, what struck me was the human stories of those involved. All those frightened, strong, helpless, hopeful people. They had needs, and their needs were met.

Today is Palm Sunday, the day of processions into Jerusalem. At the head of one procession there is Jesus, riding on the donkey. All had been prepared, and Jesus' disciples had been sent to fetch the animal with the code phrase, 'The Lord has need of it' to be spoken to the donkey's owner.

On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus had need of a donkey, not simply a means to get from the Mount of Olives into the city of Jerusalem, but to make the point that peace had come into the city of peace, that's what Jerusalem means. Luke's Palm Sunday account echoes his Christmas

story. When Jesus was born, the Gospel writer tells us that angels appeared to sing, “peace on earth”. Now, as Jesus rides his donkey towards Jerusalem, the people look to the sky and sing, ‘Peace in heaven.’ Heaven sings of peace on earth. Earth echoes back, ‘Peace in heaven’. As we worship today we are caught in this crossfire of blessings. This is what God needs today. This is what we need today.

Remembering the story of 9/11 and its horror, the little town of Gander, Newfoundland showed a broken, fearful world what kindness, and sacrifice, looks like. Those were dark days for our world. Tragedy was all around and history was changed, but kindness triumphed, and goodness helped the hurting and offered healing to a fractured creation.

Jesus, knowing what lay ahead of Him, continued. He knew what God needed, and He knew what people needed. A sacrifice beyond imagination that showed those who choose to see it what God’s love is prepared to do for us. A kindness unimaginable; a kindness that we are not meant to repay, because we can’t, but accept, because we must; a kindness that does not call us to match it, because we can’t, but calls us to do whatever we are able to do to make our world, our homes, this church, better, because we can.

What does God need from you? A little more understanding and a little less judging? A little more open-mindedness and a little less fearfulness? A little more generosity and a little less selfishness? A little more graciousness and a little less prejudice? A little more expression of love and a little less quickness to condemn? A little more commitment and a little less indifference? A little more friendliness and a little less standoffishness?

This needy God of ours, but God only needs these things because God sees the world needs these things.

Palm Sunday in Jesus’ time was such a mixed day. Joy, excitement, hopefulness, but the dark and discordant themes. Jesus comes humbly, inviting our response and does not thump us with commands. Jesus does not meet our expectations. He does not give us three wishes like a genie in a bottle, though He might asks us three times to pray in Gethsemane.

Halfway down the Mount of Olives today there is a small chapel in the shape of a teardrop. It is called Dominus Flevit, Latin for 'the Lord weeps'. It is the traditional place where Jesus stopped to weep over Jerusalem, before going onwards, on His donkey, into the city where His death would happen.

At the Dominus Flevit pilgrims gather to share worship as they move towards Jerusalem. Some share communion. It is a place of brokenness and tears, it is a place where I was reminded of what Jesus did, and what the Lord still needs.

How do we provide for the needs of God, and thereby the needs of God's people? Some show hospitality and generosity. Some show compassion and graciousness. Some show faithfulness and peace. But maybe on this day, remembering the people of Gander reaching out to frightened travellers, some might show kindness. A lot more kindness.

It is an underrated fruit of the Spirit, kindness, and all of us struggle to demonstrate it consistently. But when we do, when we perform those sometimes very little acts of kindness, we change worlds, and transform lives, and make this earthly life that little bit more liveable.

On this Palm Sunday, what does God need? Kindness.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**