

Palm Sunday 2021

There were also women looking on from afar Mark

15.40

Last November, we learned of the passing of the actor David Prowse, a figure who loomed very large in the lives of children in the 1970s and 80s. His name is familiar to many because of his most famous role – that of Darth Vader in the original Star Wars trilogy. But two years before the first of those films, Prowse began appearing on British television screens as the Green Cross Man, the personification of the government safety campaign urging children to cross the road with care. In our own safeguarding conscious times, we would I imagine be rather wary of celebrating a strange man in green tights approaching children he doesn't know in the street, but in the 1970s his insistence that everyone should Stop, Look and Listen was well known.

Stop, Look, Listen. Oddly, I think those words go some way to describing the peculiarity of this Holy Week. Whilst we are overjoyed to be in church, we remain greatly restricted in what we can do. Many of our normal practices remain forbidden – we have had to stop them. Outdoor processions, footwashing, Chrism Masses, kissing the cross – all these have been stopped for this particular year. Last year, of course, we could do nothing in person. Everything was stopped.

What we can do, we must do at a distance. We are required to keep away from one another, to avoid getting too near. We cannot embrace, we cannot shake hands, we cannot share food and drink. Instead, like the women in Mark's gospel, we stand at a distance and watch. In other words, we look. We look on at what is happening, rather than making it happen ourselves. The rites and ceremonies of Holy Week take place in part to remind us that we are not distant from this narrative, but rather are participants in the story. This morning we hail Jesus as he enters Jerusalem.

On Thursday we share his supper only to abandon him to his fate. On Friday we receive him into ourselves and are united with his crucified body. On Friday, we enter the darkness of the tomb and experience the kindling of the light of life. But this year, our participation is at one remove. We remain distanced. We are looking, looking on from afar.

We have stopped. We must look. And, of course, we must listen. We are not permitted to sing. In this particular church we are blessed with a musical provision which few places of worship can match, and the privilege which is the beauty of holiness is present to our ears even as our lips are silent. But we would like to sing, and we may not. Instead, we must listen. Listen to the gospel narratives and to the prayers of the church, as we stand at our distance looking on. Listen to the needs of those around us who have suffered and continue to suffer so much in the strangeness of these times. Listen to our hearts, to the longing of the Spirit within us which prompts and

urges that passionate grief and that Easter joy which it seems so hard at the moment to express.

Stop. Look. Listen. This will be our Holy Week. But Holy Week is holy, because it is not our Holy Week. It is God's Holy Week, God's final week, God's eternal week, the days and the drama in which the story of our own very lives will be told and retold, enacted and re-enacted, as we stop, look at and listen to what God has done and God will do among and within each one of us.

This is God's Holy week. This is our Holy Week. Let us use it to Stop and pause. To look at the cross. And to listen to the Word of God.