

During the week I was at a meeting where we were invited reflect on a memory we have of being at school and share it with the person sitting next to us. It is strange what memories we recall when we are put on the spot. The first thing which came to mind was that every Wednesday after 'little lunch' which is what we called Recess or morning break, all the students in the school would line up in their houses behind their house banner and practice marching up and down the street out the front of the school, while the school band played. We marched every Wednesday until I think I was in about year 9 and then the tradition stopped.

I realised as I was sharing this memory that it never occurred to me to ask 'why are we practicing to march' in a small farming town, with one school in the middle of nowhere – we just did it. Most of our parents had gone to the same school and they had marched, as we did, and so I don't think they asked either!

Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter – this very special time which we are entering today has many traditions and actions, not unlike marching up and down the street outside. In fact, today we have participated in two of them already. We started our service today with a kind of march, a procession of palms which has been a tradition since the early church and commemorates as we know Jesus procession into Jerusalem as a king who did not come to conquer, but rather came to change our understanding of power and to seek to bring peace.

And now we have just heard the full reading of the passion story read to us in parts, another tradition which has been part of Palm Sunday liturgy for at least the last four or five centuries.

Traditions and liturgy are important – but only if we remember why we are doing them. They make no sense if we just carry out the actions without entering into its purpose. We don't always have to understand however. There is a strong spiritual tradition within the church which stems from the early church mystics and teachers, that in the practice or action of liturgy something beyond ourselves is happening and as such God speaks to us through the practices and actions, at a level sometimes beyond our understanding.

The story and pattern of Holy Week invites us to follow through not only the story of Jesus last days on earth, through to the resurrection; but also to engage in traditions which help us to contemplate, to draw us to our knees and ponder what God is revealing to us.

At the heart of this week is the age long question of why humanity is unable to respond and embrace God's love, and why we are so fearful of change which promises a different kind of balance of power.

The shape of Holy Week, its liturgies and traditions invite us to let go of our preconceived ideas of why we are doing something, and what we think we

know of God and be open to what we need to understand and experience now.

And at the heart of this Holy Week message is the fact that God is with us. God is with us in our joy and in our suffering. Whatever we must face – we never have to face it alone – God is with us.

This week we do many strange things. We have formal prayers every day. We sit in darkness and contemplate the story of the history of the world. We wash each other's feet. We walk with the cross, we kiss the cross, we light candles from bonfires, and we sit in many vigils waiting for things to transform.

How do we sit and journey then in the coming week with these traditions?

Uncomfortably I suspect.

But we are invited to move past our discomfort, past its unfamiliarity, past the time that it takes, and engage with God in the story of the passion, and come to a renewed understanding of what new life in Christ might mean.

Each year we engage in this tradition in the hope and yearning that God will refresh us and teach us something new.

I cannot really say it any more succinctly than we heard in the opening of our service today..

Today we come together to begin this solemn celebration in union with the Church throughout the world. Christ enters his own city to complete his work as our Saviour, to suffer, to die, and to rise again. Let us go [him on this journey of Holy Week] with him in faith and love, so that, united with him in his sufferings, we may share his risen life¹.

¹ Introduction to Palm Sunday – Common Worship Times and Seasons Church of England 2006.