In January this year, a primary school headteacher took her own life following an Ofsted inspection which downgraded her school from outstanding to inadequate. What power those single words of judgement have! Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement, and the dreaded Inadequate. As a church with two schools, the lives of many of our staff and governors will inevitably revolve around those classifications. With the stroke of a pen an Ofsted inspector can change the way in which society views an institution, whether parents wish to send their children there, how the leadership feel about themselves and ultimately for some, how they see their value as people. It happens within one week.

Today, Palm Sunday, begins a process of Jesus moving swiftly from Outstanding to Inadequate within one week. It is a strange day, the joyful waving of palms, shouts of Hosanna, the joy of people recognising something in him, but perhaps not quite understanding the truth about what he had come to do. The shouts of Hosanna will change by the end of the week to shouts of Crucify him!

Our society is in many ways becoming more liberal, but in other ways far more judgemental. In some areas of modern life, shades of grey are acceptable, in others it is black or white, in or out. One moment you are acceptable, the next you are inadequate, persona non grata in the eyes of social commentators. We are becoming less tolerant of what we perceive as failure. When the tide turns against someone, as it turned against Jesus, everything is predicated upon that one failing. The good that person may have done vanishes. The value or dignity of that person disappears with the fault we gloat over, and, like the Ofsted judgment, the word failure is stuck on their forehead until they find some public way in the distant future to redeem themselves.

And yet, we are here today to worship our God who, in Christ, faced failure in its many sad and tragic forms.
Rejected when he tried to preach in his own home town, Jesus’ ministry was so extraordinary there was an occasion when even his own family thought he had lost his mind. He constantly failed to convince his disciples about the nature of the kingdom he came to usher in. He was rejected by the crowd who initially feted him. He was betrayed by close friends. At his darkest hour on the cross, he was deserted by all but a few, mocked by others, and was laid in a borrowed tomb. But we know that this was not the end. Jesus experienced failures but ultimately he was not a failure. Despite the struggles and agony, in fact, because of them, he did what he came to do, despite not meeting the usual measures of worldly success.

As someone once wrote

Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today Jesus is the central figure of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned—put together—have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one, solitary life. The crowd who cried out ‘Hosanna’ on Palm Sunday were right, even though they turned against him. ‘Hosanna’, ‘Save us’! He did, he has and he continues to. He has saved us from hopelessness, from alienation from God, from being enslaved by the sin, the mistakes, the failures of our lives. When it comes to Jesus, he never sticks ‘Failure’ or ‘Inadequate’ on our foreheads, because we are all Gods beloved children, made in God’s image. He has paid the price for the inspection that condemns us.

Holy Week is a difficult week to observe. We cannot but consider our sin and the sin of the world that nailed Jesus to that bitter cross. But we know it is not the end. For at the end of it we can shout that our King who rides on a donkey reigns. That the kingdom of our God has become the Kingdom of His Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever. I’d like to end with a lovely story which anticipates that moment, the glorious end to the week ahead.

When our failures lay heavy upon us, we would do well to remember the Benedictine monk, who found that, due to cold, damp weather, his carefully stored wine had begun to ferment a second time, creating within it bubbles of carbon dioxide. What a failure. But wait, the name of the monk? Dom Perignon, The inventor of champagne! Oh happy fault.

May Christ, who out of defeat brings new hope and a new future, strengthen us to suffer with him and fill us with his new life; and to him, our redeemer, king, be all glory, laud and honour. Amen.