

## **Come thou unexpected Jesus**

14April2019 – Palm Sunday – Ron Flaming

Zech 9:9-12 Ps 113: 1-2, 19-29 Phil 2:5-11 Lk19:28-40

May the mumbling of my mouth and meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God. Amen.

### **Setting**

It is a week before Passover and we are sitting around a city gate at Jerusalem watching pilgrims as they come into the city for the great festival. The day is already hot and dusty.

Travellers coming to the city make for interesting people watching.

We aren't just sitting here out of curiosity. We are well paid by the chief priest to count the influx of pilgrims as well as to report to him any that look suspicious, as if they might stir up trouble in the crowded city.

### **The Story**

Listen! Do you hear that? It sounds like a crowd yelling beyond that hillcrest ... down in the valley towards Bethany over there.

Now I can see the dust being kicked up and floating into the air. They must be getting closer because I can make out what they are shouting, they are shouting "Blessed be the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"The king who comes in the name of the Lord?!" What is this? What's going on? I know people have been saying now would be a perfect time for the Messiah to come.

The Messiah will be anointed by God and will re-establish the Kingdom of God in Israel and free us from Roman captivity, just like God rescued us from slavery in Egypt and from exile in Babylon.

Is this what's happening? Is the King that will be the Messiah, just over the hill there? The chief priest will definitely want to hear about this one.

Now I can see some tree branches just rising over the crest of the hill! Here he comes!

What's this? There's no king! This must be a joke. Maybe it's a circus coming to town. There's just some kind of a clown riding on a small donkey, dragging his feet on the ground.

I've seen the Roman governor Pilate and his puppet Herod riding into the city in grand style on a chariot. I've seen the general of the Legion riding on a horse that radiates strength and power. I think I'd know a king when I see one.

So why is this crowd streaming after this guy on a donkey and shouting and singing as if he were God's anointed king? First of all, this guy looks like a joke of a king, and secondly, Herod will be furious at anyone claiming to be King of Israel. And Pilate will not put up with any political shenanigans.

I hear someone shouting "It is just like the prophet said ... God's anointed king will ride into the city of God on a donkey and will bring peace to all nations." That rabble is getting pretty excited.

O good! Here come some of the Pharisees running out of the gate towards the motley crowd. Let them tell the chief priest all about this. They are telling the teacher on the donkey to quiet his people down or there will be trouble. ...

Wait ... the Pharisees called him "teacher". "Teacher" ... mmmhh ... I wonder if this might be that teacher/healer Jesus of Nazareth who's been roaming all over in Galilee?

He tells the Pharisees that if he got his followers to be quiet, then the stones on the ground would get up and shout. He's gotta be nuts!

But he just keeps going, and his followers keep shouting "Glory in the highest heaven, the king is coming in the name of the Lord!"

He pauses for a bit on his donkey just outside the city gate. I can tell he is looking at the walls, those indestructible walls made of solid stone blocks. There he goes riding into the city out of my sight.

I wonder what will become of this clown once the chief priest hears he's in town?

## **Reflection**

This story reminds me of the Advent hymn "come thou long expected Jesus". But with an ironic twist because here Jesus is an unexpected Messiah rather than the long expected one.

This is not a new insight for us. With 2000 years of hindsight and over 450 years of peace teaching we Mennonites trumpet the significance of a king riding a donkey instead of war horse.

A different question comes to mind, "does Jesus still surprise us in unexpected ways today?" Or do we know Jesus completely? Maybe the Bible stories are so familiar to us that they hold no more surprises.

I believe that Jesus can surprise us. If we trust the Holy Spirit is active. If we listen with ears shaped by faith, or as Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, if the eyes of our heart are enlightened.

First, as life happens around us, the stories of Jesus bring new insights or are fulfilled in new ways. This is what is happening when you read a familiar text and notice a detail that has never stood out to you in the past but is suddenly relevant to something happening in your life.

Second, the Holy Spirit is at work bringing teaching and insight directly to us, or through the illumination of conversation with others. This can lead to unexpected passions and actions of faith.

In these two ways: re-seeing scriptural stories of Jesus in the light of current events, and through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus keeps showing up as the unexpected Messiah.

We tend look for Jesus in places we expect to meet him ... in church, in worship, in Christian fellowship.

What if Jesus came to us from outside the boxes we expect ... would we recognize him? Specifically, I've been wondering if Jesus is at work *outside* the Christian fold? It's expected that we equate Jesus' message and presence with Christianity. Yet, consider what Jesus said in the Gospel of John, that his followers will be known by the fact that they have love for one another. Might we find Jesus among those who practice this "sign of followers of Jesus" but do not actually confess to being members of the Christian fold? That would be unexpected.

I wondered about this when I heard a CBC podcast recently about a weekly lunch event at the University of British Columbia called the "Taste of Co-existence". This weekly lunch is hosted by two chefs from Vancouver. One is a Jewish restaurateur and the other is Palestinian.

*El Khatib grew up in a Palestinian refugee camp and moved to Canada in 2016. He says "In Arab countries on TV they never acknowledge Israel — they always say the 'Zionist occupation, the occupying enemy'. If you are found to have any interactions with Israel, on any level, you are basically collaborating with the enemy".*

*Itamar Shani grew up in an Israeli settlement. As a child, he used to visit a nearby Arab village with his father on the weekends until, one day after the First Intifada in the late 1980s, a wall was built between the two towns.*

The pair hope that by showcasing their friendship in Vancouver and celebrating what Palestinians and Israelis have in common (beginning with humus and falafel) they will help change attitudes.

Might this Muslim and this Jew be unexpectedly displaying the sign of Jesus' followers in their intentional public demonstration of love for one another? Could this be the work of the Holy Spirit or the presence of Jesus in a way that is unexpected to us, who are inside of Christianity?

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday. Behold the King who comes on a donkey in the name of the Lord!

We look for Jesus in places we expect to meet him ...in church, in worship or in Christian fellowship.

But Jesus is not always as we expect. May the eyes of our hearts be enlightened to see and welcome the unexpected Jesus when he appears in our lives. Amen.