

The Palm Sunday Roller Coaster, WNMC, 5 April 2020

Mt 21: 1-11, Phil 2:5-11 (*other texts for day: Is 50:4-9a, Ps 118:1-2,19-29*)

The gospel stories we have read this Lent started, and end today, with familiar stories in Matthew. For the middle four weeks we looked at familiar stories from the gospel of John. In response to every story we asked God to “show us” something.

- Show us the way through the wilderness and temptation
- Show us the extent of your faithful loving presence as you did to Nicodemus and Abraham.
- Show us where we can get living water, such as you gave to the Samaritan woman at well.
- Show us our blindness, so we can turn from it toward love and humility.
- Show us new life and your power over death, as you did when you raised your friend Lazarus.

The story on this last Sunday of Lent is Jesus’ heralded entry into Jerusalem. Today we ask God to **show us** again how to follow Jesus--whom we proclaim as our Lord--on this tumultuous week, a week which begins with a triumphant parade and descends into the depths of despair at the cross, before ending in the glory of resurrection and new life at Easter.

The suggested title for this Sunday’s service in the worship resources from Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church U.S.A. is: “Show us how to balance celebration and grief.” Allow me to offer a caution about the use here of the word “balance.” I do not think we are asking God to help us diminish the height of our feelings of elation nor the depth of our feelings of grief. Rather we confess both to God and ask God to work through us as we celebrate and as we grieve.

I have always had a bit of a hard time with the emotions of Palm Sunday. I am an F (if you speak Myers-Briggs) for whom how I **feel** about things matters more to me than what I **think** about them. As one who experiences his feelings deeply, the Palm Sunday story is hard for me to engage in fully. Frankly it’s even hard to fully experience the despair of Jesus’ crucifixion. I live on this side of Easter and Christ’s resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But I don’t want to prematurely usher us past the events of holy week.

But today we are just on the cusp of Holy Week and its despair and we are asked to get psyched up to remember and celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem as saviour and king. Can you handle the ups and downs? It’s an emotional roller coaster.

How ought we properly commemorate a week of such dramatic happenings when we cannot fully re-create the extent of the highs and lows. Because we already know the ending, the resurrection, how can we replicate the depth of feelings of despair at Jesus’

crucifixion? (Perhaps it is a blessing that we cannot.) But this Sunday, how triumphantly can we really celebrate Jesus' coming knowing that by Friday the loud majority of us will have turned on him chanting to crucify him and to release Barabbas instead.

Of course you know it was all a misunderstanding! The main reason for the quick reversal of Jesus' apparent fortunes is that he didn't live up to the people's expectations. By the middle of the week it was apparent that he was not at all the kind of Messiah they thought they were getting when they celebrated his arrival in Jerusalem. When given a choice the people ask for Barabbas to be released back to them rather than this disappointment of a saviour.

What was it about Jesus that caused him to lose the popular support he seemed to have on Palm Sunday? Was it the nature of his kingdom? Or was it the means by which he was inaugurating it?

Christians have sometimes emphasized differences in the **nature** of the kingdom that Jesus was inaugurating, insisting that Jesus was only proclaiming an other-worldly spiritual kingdom that operates in such a separate domain that it can't reasonably be perceived as much of a threat to earthly kingdoms. I find that when I re-read the story of Jesus without starting with such an assumption, it is nearly impossible to miss the radical social and economic implications of his claims. I can see why both the political and religious leaders of his day would see him as a threat. The kingdom he proclaims is both present and future, material and spiritual, internal and external.

I think that the crowds' disappointment with him is not so much a rejection or misunderstanding of the **nature** of his kingdom as of the **means** he was ready to use to attain it. The crowds expected a Messiah who would be on their side, who would liberate them from Rome, their political oppressors, but who would do so by exercising power in the conventional way they were used to. Instead, Jesus' understanding of God's ways was that power was to be exercised radically differently! Jesus wanted to use completely different means. He wasn't understood and the crowds had no patience for him.

Jesus' way was a way of suffering, not making others suffer!

Throughout his gospel Matthew puts emphasis on Jesus as king. Matthew sets up Jesus' journey as a journey to the cross where this maligned misunderstood king gets his robe and his crown. The cross was the result of what Jesus did. Over his head his executioners placed a sign reading: "King of the Jews". He refused to play according to the political and religious rules. As Matthew makes Jesus' journey a journey to the cross, likewise our Holy Week journey is a journey to the cross.

Many have pointed out that in the Bible **the cross is the one way that we are asked to follow Jesus**. Wearing sandals (even Birkenstocks) is not how we're called to emulate our

Lord. One could probably make a better argument for hanging out with people who catch fish for a living, but the way we are called to follow Jesus is in both his message and his means, and they led him to a cross.

Bearing one's cross is NOT a euphemism for some burden unique to an individual's situation. Jesus' cross--the cross his followers are warned to expect--is the direct result of opposition from those who feel threatened by his rule. We can expect to be tortured, because by following Jesus we--like him--are a threat to the established order, "the world." At Waterloo North most of us do not have a heightened consciousness of "the world" in this sense. If anything we probably react against elements of our upbringing where the term "the world" was used to refer to those who followed other religions or no religion, or belonged to other churches, or perhaps even those who went to movies or used tobacco or alcohol, or played with playing cards instead of Rook cards. But here "the world" means the established order, those in power and their definitions of common sense and what's most important.

Today's epistle text in Philippians 2 reiterates that we, on the other hand, are not to be like those in charge, but are to be of the same mind as Jesus: to exercise power in this inverted way, to empty ourselves, to be humble servants, to be obedient in our following, even as it leads to death on a cross. Let me read verses 5 through 8 and then repeat part of verse 5:

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.
⁵ Let the same mind be in you.

In our time and place what happens to those who preach a different gospel than happiness through consumption, security through military might and financial security through RRSPs? What is society's sanction for those who seek security in relationship with God, who pursue justice, who break social norms and hang out with disrespectable folks? Fortunately here and now we don't literally kill such people on a cross.

I Corinthians 1 speaks repeatedly of the foolishness of the cross. Pause and think for a bit of the irony of the way we use the symbol of the cross. It was an instrument of death, of capital punishment. A modern-day equivalent would be an electric chair or a syringe. Imagine the ludicrousness of those as pretty little pieces of jewelry. . . or a large replica of a syringe or electric chair hanging here on our wall.

Of course the cross was **not** a sign of resignation or defeat. As we will celebrate at Easter, Jesus was raised from the dead, and hence the cross is perversely also a symbol that Jesus

was triumphant over the powers, over sin and all in this world that oppresses.

Jim Wallis, in his book *The Call to Conversion*, says it this way, “For Jesus, the cross was the expected result of a moral clash with the powers of his society. His cross, therefore, not only frees us from personal sin; it also liberates us from the power of this world.” [p.165]

The Roman oppressors and the established religious authorities (or cosmically, the forces of evil) dished out every weapon they had in their arsenal in their fight against Jesus (God) and they were vanquished. The cross killed him, but the grave couldn't hold him. Through the cross he vanquished death.

It is this way of fighting evil that we are called **to** as followers of Jesus. This is why our commitment to nonviolence isn't an option tangential to the gospel, it is at the very core. We share in Christ's death, and also in his resurrection!

So, what does it mean for us in Waterloo in 2020 to follow Jesus to the cross? That is for us to ponder this Holy Week as we reflect on the events in Jesus' life 2000 years ago.

At the outset I gave a caution (mostly to myself) about the risk of prematurely jumping to Easter. I do not want to undermine our Holy Week journey. That said-- as a person deeply influenced by evangelical, pietist, and Lutheran traditions, and who sees those traditions in part as a gift that came with me when I was drawn to the Mennonite Church over 35 years ago—I cannot end a sermon, even at the start of Holy Week, with a call for us to take up our crosses, **unless** it is accompanied by a very strong word of grace. Now to do that without jumping the gun on Easter is tricky. But I think we must.

In spite of the gloom of Holy Week, my friends, I want us to go into our journey this week fully aware of God's constant grace.

If in your Holy Week reflections you share my impression that our call to follow Jesus is not limited to some pious partitioned segment of our lives but goes deeper than we are usually able or willing to acknowledge . . . If you realize that the areas in our lives that cry for God's healing touch are far from superficial, but that at a deep level in the spiritual, mental, physical, social, political, and economic aspects of our lives we are called to repent of destructive ways and to open ourselves to God's love . . . Then please also heed the warning that God's call is probably not a call to do more, to feel guilty about more things or more profoundly, to strive harder, or to be more spiritual.

Rather I pray that we hear God's call as a call to surrender, to understand that God loves and accepts us in our humanness with all our warts and our unique combinations of strengths and weaknesses, health and illness, hopes and fears. May we hear God's call on us firstly as a call to allow God to love us more fully.

This Holy Week, as we follow Jesus into the depths, may we see the depth of God's love in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus!

May God bless us all as we journey with Jesus this week!