

Sermon for Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024

You know, some people might think Jesus was downright foolish to go to Jerusalem that Passover. Certainly some of his disciples thought so and said so. Jesus knew that the powerful people, Sadducees and Pharisees, really disliked him and wanted to shut him down. He knew the Roman authorities were suspicious of anyone who caused any kind of disturbance. But he still went to Jerusalem, when thousands of people would be gathered there for Passover. Including a lot of Roman soldiers, in case the Jewish people got out of hand and started a revolution.

He entered the city riding a donkey and letting people shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David, the coming King of Israel." Which is pretty provocative behaviour: Caesar was King and the Romans wouldn't tolerate any others and the Jewish leaders didn't think Jesus was the Messiah, which is what this means. He overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple and chased all the sacrificial animals out. What was he playing at? Why would he do this? Because he probably had a very good idea that it would end on a cross. So why?

I believe it was because he loves us and he couldn't bear to see people oppressed and misled, particularly by the religious authorities. St. Luke tells us that at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus said he had come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. So he started with the oppression by his own religious leaders, who were making a killing from people's acts of piety, their sacrifices.

But you can't free people from oppression and bring in a kingdom based on caring for people if you run away and hide in a cave at the first sign of opposition. He could have done that, I imagine it was tempting, but it would have meant giving up his mission. If you want to break oppression, you need to stand up to the oppressors. If you want to free people from living in fear, you have to have courage. And who knows? They might even listen.

And if you want to show people a new way of living based on loving your neighbours and even your enemies, you can't really raise an army and try to defeat them in battle and force them to do things your way on pain of prison or death. Because it kind of defeats the purpose. Then you've become just as bad as the people you're trying to stop. This is the way the political leaders of this world behave. They offer us peace based on complete subjection.

Benjamin Netanyahu thinks there will be peace in Gaza when every member of Hamas is dead, and he doesn't care how many children, women, ordinary working men, or elderly people he kills to do it. Hamas and other groups like them think Israel should be destroyed, pushed into the sea, and then there'll be peace. And they're willing to kill a bunch of innocent party goers and capture others, regardless of the predictable results for their own people. And if those two groups have their way, peace there will look like a rubble filled wasteland with no one left alive.

That is not the peace Jesus offers. Jesus offers the peace of the Kingdom of God, where people live in harmony – not just the absence of war, but actual peaceful, harmonious, loving relationships. Where everyone sits under their own vine and their own fig tree – that is, where everyone has meaningful work, enough to eat, and time to rest. Shalom, the peace promised by Isaiah and by Jesus. And you don't get it by waging war.

So Jesus walked right into the temple and he confronted the leadership, non-violently. He did overturn the money changers' tables and scatter their coins in the dust. He did drive the sacrificial animals out of the Temple. But he didn't hurt anyone. And then he answered their trick questions and asked a few questions himself which they couldn't answer. They looked foolish. And of course, the next step was to get rid of him.

Ultimately, Jesus did all this because he loves us so much. Jesus is showing us the lengths to which God will go to heal us and forgive us and love us. At Christmas we celebrate the coming of the Son of God to earth in human form, as Jesus of Nazareth to live among us, to share our lives with us, to teach us and heal us and be an example for us of how to live. This is what the epistle today is about, God emptying himself and coming to live among us.

In Holy Week we celebrate the fact that the Son of God was not just willing to share our lives with us, but also shares our death with us. And looking forward to Pentecost, God is willing to share our lives in a different way, by the indwelling Holy Spirit. But here we are brought face to face with God's outrageously extravagant love, being willing to die as we die to show us how much God loves us. And that God stands with the poor, the weak, the oppressed, always. Stands with them even to the death.

And ultimately, in doing that, he shows up the poverty of the might of Empire. Hanging on the cross looks like a defeat in worldly eyes. Certainly the Roman and Jewish leadership thought it was defeat. But in fact, it was a major victory, because in doing that, in forgiving us from the cross even as we were putting him to death, God shows us that love is indeed stronger than hatred, stronger than death, stronger than anything. And when Jesus is raised from the dead, God shows he agrees. Jesus was right.

As we follow Jesus through Holy Week, from the glory of the palms to the glory of the resurrection, by way of the cruel cross, remember this. Remember that he has done this to love us and to show us a new way of living. If we can accept this astounding gift with awe and wonder and humility, then that inspires us to live as Jesus lived. Wherever we are in life. Most of us will never have to confront an occupying power that is oppressing our people, not in Canada, anyway. Nor has our church currently got enough power to oppress very many people, at least not in this country. Though we are doing our best as a church to acknowledge and accept and make reparations for the appalling oppression we've been involved in in the past.

But there are a few things we all have the opportunity to do. We can refrain from oppressing or bullying people ourselves. We can refrain from using any power we have to put other people down or hurt them. When we see other people being bullied, we can resist the temptation to freeze and be quiet and hope the bully doesn't notice us. We all learned to do that in the school yard. We can resist the temptation to slip away and be safe. We can resist the temptation to fight fire with fire, by fighting them back or calling them names, and making ourselves as bad as they are.

Instead we can follow Jesus' example. We can use our power to stand up for the people being bullied and raise them up, even if it costs us a bit. We can stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. We can always put ourselves in other people's place and have the courage to treat them the way we would like to be treated ourselves, the way Jesus treated them.

When we do these sorts of things, we are throwing in our lot with Jesus and saying yes to following him. Saying that, in our life at least, his sacrifice was taken to heart. Whenever we live the way Jesus taught us, loving God and loving one another, we are saying yes to him, saying thank you for what he did for us, opening ourselves to the mystery of the cross and receiving that self-giving love of his. We are saying yes to the eternal life and love he offers us. God bless us all as we walk with Jesus in this last week of his life, and then go out to follow his example by finding the courage to love one another as he has loved us.