

PALM SUNDAY & OUR WORLD TODAY

Zechariah 9: 9-10; Luke 19: 28-47

Palm Sunday... You could not have a holy week in any Christian church anywhere in the world without Palm Sunday. Whether it's artwork through the ages, or music or Easter pageants, Palm Sunday is always presented to us as a great drama displaying Jesus entering Jerusalem hailed by the crowds waving their cloaks and palm branches.

But you know, there's a lot about Palm Sunday we may not know, and unless we get to know what Palm Sunday is about and all the messages that are being communicated, we may fail to really appreciate the meaning of Holy Week altogether.

Palm Sunday features prominently in all four gospel accounts. And in all four accounts, whether as direct quote or indirect reference, the prophecy found in Zechariah, read just a few moments ago, is cited. Why? Well, what is the prophecy saying? It speaks of a king - the Messiah coming to save the people and lead them to victory. But what kind of victory? He's coming triumphant and victorious, but also, and pay attention to this: "humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey." He's not coming dressed in resplendent armour riding a war horse, but humble, riding on a colt. What's the message here? And further, we read this: "He will cut off the chariot... and the war horse... and the battle-bow... and... he will command peace to the nations."

What is this telling us? Humble, riding on a colt, cutting off the tools of war and seeking to establish peace in a way different than military defeat... this is a very different way to peace from a very different kind of messiah-king. And rather than anger and fury itching to kill, here's what we read as the first action Jesus takes upon entry into Jerusalem: "As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it..." Why did Jesus weep over Jerusalem? Here's what he says in his weeping: "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" Ah, here's that word "peace" again! The things that make for peace... What are those things that make for peace?

Certainly, the symbols of riding on a colt speak of a different approach to peace than riding with fighting armour on a warhorse. And certainly, weeping over Jerusalem speaks of a different spirit than riding into the city with shouts of triumph and angry threats against all enemies. And certainly, talking of peace offers a very different message than talking of war and crushing all enemies by force as the only path to peace. So, what's all this about?

Before we can really understand an answer to this question, let me offer some necessary historical background. The year is 167 before Christ. The Jewish people have been under

foreign occupation and this last occupation by Greeks and Syrians has been especially brutal. A king named Antiochus Epiphanes rules Judea. Not only does Epiphanes brutalize the people and murder and enslave many. But he goes into the temple and desecrates it by putting up a statue of a Greek god. But then, there emerges a hero of the people coming from one of the elite religious clans. His name is: Judas Maccabeus. He and his men rise up and defeat the colonizers and send them running. And upon a final military victory he comes riding into Jerusalem on a warhorse decked in armour still bloodied from the fight. Judas is hailed as messiah-saviour king of the people. People are waving their cloaks and palm branches as he enters the city. The story of the Jewish holiday Hannukah celebrates this victory.

And the first act Judas takes when he enters the city is go into the temple to cleanse it of all the pollution of the gentiles who have defiled it. This act also symbolizes the people retaking their land, their identity and their freedom. This freedom lasts 100 years. In the meantime, the people's enthusiasm goes up and then down. The house of Judas Maccabeus, which is the same lineage as the high priests, Sadducees and their families at the time of Jesus, rules the people. But many of the people wonder whether things have gotten any better for them. There is corruption and the leaders amass great wealth for themselves while the majority suffer destitution and brutal crackdowns against any protests. Yes this religious aristocracy are Jews rather than foreign colonizers, but it doesn't make them compassionate or caring for the people. So, what happens after 100 years?

Rome happens. Caesar now rules and Rome's star is rising all over the world. Rome's conquest begins, and Judea is part of an invasion of foreign lands in search of wealth through the taking of land and the enslavement of people. A new era of occupation begins. But Rome doesn't want to make the same mistake the Greeks and Syrians did. Why not have Jews continue to rule Jews, so long as those who rule are subject to Rome and serve Rome. Rome will keep you leaders in power with all the material benefits of power and you keep the people pacified with fear of punishment physical and eternal should they disobey, and the use of force where necessary. Fear and terror to back it up, are tried and true methods of control. This is the only way to peace.

The new local king under Rome is Herod – the grandfather of the Herod of Jesus' birth story. Herod has some Jewish blood, and he has been a good ally of Rome in winning battles against the Parthians to the north. Herod is made King and for good measure marries into the family line of Judas Maccabeus providing a symbol of continuity. But is there any real peace and salvation for the people? Or is there a new enemy now that must be dealt with?

Here's where Jesus comes in. Not only is he not pointing the finger at Rome as some expect him to do. He begins by pointing his finger at the leaders of his own people: Herod and the chief priests and scribes, the very family line of Judas Maccabeus! They have taken advantage of the people and are responsible for terrorizing and enslaving them at the call of Rome. They've

twisted the sacred faith in God as a form of terror and threat to support armed control over the people. You must obey the rules and laws as we interpret them because we are God's chosen rulers and interpreters of the faith. You must sacrifice in the temple as we have established this system and pay your taxes because we are the only ones protecting you from a far worse fate at the hands of Rome. Your eternal destiny and your physical destiny here and now depend on us. This is what the local elite leaders are pushing on their own people.

And so, it's no surprise that given Jesus' constant conflict with the religious authorities throughout his ministry, against their interpretation of the law and their oppressiveness of the people, after his time of weeping over Jerusalem he goes right into the temple like Judas Maccabeus 160 years before him. And rather than purifying the temple against gentile defilement, he drives out those who are doing business for the temple establishment – the chief priests and their staff. The business in question is all the sacrifice of animals which is part of how they make a good chunk of their money, especially on the highest holiday that is Passover with pilgrims having come from all over the world. By driving out the sellers and calling out the leadership as turning the temple from a house of prayer to “den of robbers”, Jesus is also declaring that Israel's leadership has become the enemy of God in a way far more sinister and damaging than any external oppressor. Wow!

OK, that was a lot of background for one sermon. But here's how it may help us understand the heart of the issue between Jesus and the religious establishment who want to kill him. Is Jesus the Messiah or is he a false messiah leading the people against their appointed leaders? Whose side is God on? And how is peace to be established? Is peace about keeping the people under control and pacified to protect the status quo that serves a few at the expense of the many? Or is the peace that Jesus has been trying to evoke in the people while challenging what he has called the false shepherds of the people, a peace that is truly of God?

Here's where I want to bring in a recent article I read written by the editorial board of the Globe and Mail newspaper. This article is about empathy and how it may be more relevant than ever in our world today. The article was written as a response to a recent podcast interview in which Elon Musk, working alongside Donald Trump, was asked about empathy, especially in the face of all the cuts he and his team have been making to foreign aid and social programs. According to Musk, empathy may have its value, but it is also a weakness. Empathy is an emotional glitch that can be “weaponized” and force civilizational suicide. In other words, Musk is arguing that the U.S. has been far too empathetic with people outside and inside the nation. To be strong and tough, you need to set empathy aside and use other metrics like profit and power over others, bringing them to their knees and forcing them to toughen up and grow up.

But is such a view and such a vision true? Is it not hypocritical and a rationale for amassing power and wealth for the few against the many? The religious and political leadership Jesus was in conflict with believed something akin to what Musk is promoting. Trump's vision for America

and the world is very similar to that of Rome. But if we are to follow Jesus, beginning on this Palm Sunday, as our messiah-saviour, then we need to embrace empathy and compassion as the real source of strength for any society that counts. As another Jew – Hannah Arendt, born in Germany and escaping the Nazis in the 1930s wrote: “The death of human empathy is one of the earliest and most telling signs of a culture about to fall into barbarism.”

The key for us, not only as Canadians and as good neighbours, but also as followers of Jesus seeking to be ever more faithfully his hands, feet, voice and heart for each other and in our world... the key for us is this: Will we continue to cultivate in us the kind of empathy that follows through in compassion and relationships where compassion is primary, or will fear, leading to indifference, mistrust and hate poison our souls and our relationships? Sin is not some abstract concept. What Jesus will face on the cross is not some formula for being saved. It is about confronting in ourselves as much as in others, destructive anti-love elements in us that need to be purged - crucified, making space for love to flow in and through us resurrecting new life and new ways of building relationships. That's what the early church became – a series of new cells of resurrection life where empathy and compassion ruled against fear and selfishness. That's what we are called to renew in ourselves each and every holy week, each and every year – compassionate, spacious, inclusive love.

May such love find a way into our hearts afresh beginning with the people in and around us... It's hard work sometimes, and yet peace without love is no peace that is worth having, no peace that is real and no peace that can last...

Let us pray: Come to us afresh on this Palm Sunday, O God, and come to us anew in this holy week. Purge from us all the anti-love currents afflicting us... and in that space, flood us with your love so that new life may arise in us, so that true peace can begin to be felt within us even as our world is so conflicted... In Jesus' name we pray this way... Amen.