

Preaching
Sunday April 5th, 2020
Palm Sunday – I just can't wait NOT to be king.
Matthew 21:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29.

It is always fun to have a parade on Palm Sunday, have a bit of fun with it and make a point.

But if we leave this story at the parade, then we end up actually missing the point. This is how Bill Loader puts it:

Palm Sunday is also [Passion Sunday](#). The Palm Sunday passage moves us towards the Passion. It has its genesis in Jesus' strategy to bring himself and his message to Jerusalem. This was much more than a PR opportunity not to be missed because of the concentration of people in Jerusalem during Passover. Rather it belongs to the body language of the message of the 'kingdom'. It is an expression of hope for change. Just as Jesus reflected the Jewish roots of his passion for change by choosing twelve disciples, so also his march on Zion reflects his people's vision that God would bring about a change beginning with Jerusalem. To affirm the vision of the kingdom and to live out its hopes in the present in action and symbol meant challenging existing structures of authority, both those of the temple leadership and those of Rome. This is the backdrop for the drama which follows. To journey with Jesus still means espousing a challenge to the powers which hold sway in our world (and our church). (Loader)

Today is Palm Sunday, the last Sunday in Lent, the doorway to Holy Week, a week away from Easter Sunday arguably the most important celebration on the churches calendar. By this time churches around the world are gearing up for the biggest church week of the year, some with services every day, even several times a day, some with just a few, maybe Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, all leading up to the big one, Easter Day. It is at the same time usually an exhausting week but also exciting and a roller coaster of emotions, and a hive of activity.

But this year, it is markedly different.

Churches around the world are empty, will be empty on Easter Sunday, empty this week.

For many of us this week will be a lonely time, a sad time when we can't meet face to face with our friends and family in a church that will be a second home for many. We are being forced into hiding as it were.

How then does this story make sense to us this year?

What can we make of it mostly incarcerated in our own homes?

Which got me to thinking.

The power of the day in this story was of course Rome. And I think because for much of the gospel stories this truth sits often in the background, and only really comes to the fore in the passion stories, we tend to discount the influence of Rome on these times.

Let's be clear, it was everywhere.

People were scared to move around, scared in their own towns, scared to leave their own homes.

And maybe this year that is our entry point to this story.

Caught in our own homes we can reflect on this story in light of our own fears.

And not just our personal ones but the deeply held fears of the community against a power that is so small as to be unseen, unlike the might of Rome.

But let me stay with the story for now.

Jesus entry into Jerusalem as Bill Loader suggests, is a confrontation to the powers of that day and this.

Some scholars such as John Dominic Crossan have suggested that as Jesus entered Jerusalem through one side of the city, Pilate entered the city from the other side. Whether this actually is the case, it offers a provocative image for us to consider. It paints a polarizing image for us, inviting us to consider, where do we stand and which do we support?

To journey with Jesus still means espousing a challenge to the powers which hold sway in our world (and our church). (Loader)

It is useful for us also to consider that Jerusalem was already packed for the holiday week, the week before the Passover celebration. Every man, his family and his dog tried to get to Jerusalem for this occasion because this was (and is) the big-ticket item on the Jewish calendar, as Easter is for us.

So it was crowded.

Real crowded.

The Roman historian Josephus is recorded as claiming there were 2.5 million people in Jerusalem at that time.

Keep in mind this was in the old walled city of Jerusalem, not modern day Jerusalem which by comparison has around 900,000 people.

Even if the number was half what Josephus claimed, it is still enormous amounts of people in that space and surrounds. But if he is correct, then it was squash city.

I shudder at the thought of how their toilets managed.

So you can imagine, the Romans were on full alert.

And we can reasonably assume it was like this the entire week until the end of the Passover.

Into this mass of humanity rode Jesus on the donkey, and possibly Pilate, on a war horse, surrounded by soldiers, not merely for show, but for protection too.

And there is still more here for us to consider.

Jan Richardson has written these thoughts on this story from Matthew.

This is the week we remember once again the moment when Jesus enters Jerusalem, moving with intention and deliberation into what waits for him there.

In some respects, the final stretch of Jesus' path has been laid out for him. We know what will happen to him after he enters the city. We know the terrible road he will walk to the cross. Yet Jesus is no helpless victim here, no passive participant. He is not dragged into Jerusalem, nor does he slink into the city on the sly. Jesus does not cease to make his own road as he chooses to walk with courage and clarity.

Get up and do not be afraid, he told the disciples on the mount of transfiguration. Here he continues to take his own advice. (me)

Jan continues - This week invites us to consider how we are moving through our own journey—through Lent as well as through life. Are we allowing ourselves to be swept along by circumstances, traveling our road by default?

Or are we seeking to walk with intention and discernment, creating our path with some measure of the courage and clarity by which Christ walked his, even in the midst of forces that may (do?) lie beyond our control?

There is a time for stillness, for waiting for Christ as he makes his dancing way toward us. And there is a time to be in motion, to set out on a path, knowing that although God is everywhere, and always with us, we sometimes need a journey in order to meet God—and ourselves—anew.

This is a week to ask, Jan writes, how do we meet God in motion?

I want to ask, how do we meet God in stillness? How do we meet God in the walls of our home in which we might feel trapped, how do we meet God when we might be going a little stir crazy?

Jan continues with her words - How do we move toward the One who is already making his way toward us? Whatever circumstance we may find ourselves in, how do we participate in creating our path? What road is calling to us and has our name written on its stones? And more importantly, will we go?

How we grapple with such questions in this time, is extraordinarily unique. Most of us have never, and hopefully will never again, find ourselves, our world in fact, in this position again.

Nevertheless, here we are, confined to our homes, under the rule of an invisible power, contemplating a parade.

Everybody loves a parade.

But after the “Jesus is coming pave the way with branches” bit, there is even more. There is the picking up of the branches and the cloaks, putting them in lost property and hoping the owners will claim them.

Then there is the last bit of that stony road to walk.

A walk that does not have a pretty end.

At least not at first.

So, get up, take that next step, wash your hands, do the next right thing and don't be afraid.

Jesus is coming.

Hosanna.

Amen.