

March 25, 2018 - Palm Sunday Reflection

Mark 11:1-11

Here we are at another Palm Sunday. The children have waved the palm branches and we've sung our hosannas, remembering Jesus, the humble servant king. But that Palm Sunday event which *we celebrate* today, was actually in Jesus' time, the celebration of Passover – one of the most important festivals in the Jewish calendar. It was a time when the Jewish people hearkened back to the Exodus and commemorated the liberation of the Children of Israel who were led out of Egypt by Moses. Thousands of people would have been flocking into the city of Jerusalem for the festival ... it was something like Canada Day on Parliament Hill.

And as part of that festival there were actually two parades.

Theologians Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan talk about those two processions – one from the Mount of Olives on the east, with Jesus, cheered on by his followers, but also a Roman procession entering from the west, which would have had as a focal point the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Their purpose was to reinforce the Roman garrison stationed near the temple for the season of Passover, to control the tens of thousands of Jewish pilgrims who filled the city.

The juxtaposition of these two processions would have set up quite a contrast. One came as an expression of empire and military occupation whose goal was to make sure oppressed people did not find deliverance. It approached the city using horses, brandishing weapons, proclaiming the power of empire.

The other procession by contrast, was marked by entrance on a donkey and laying down cloaks and branches along the road. This entry of Jesus was ultimately symbolic, of course, and reminiscent of the prophecy of Zechariah, that the king entering Jerusalem on a donkey colt was to banish the weapons of war from the land and speak peace to the nations.

And so the crowd shouted, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!", but did they really understand that this one in whom they had placed their hope, would save them not by might and military power, but through the proclamation of the peaceful reign of God?

It is significant also that Jesus comes riding a colt that has never been ridden. Jesus is different. It has never been done this way before. And not only that, we are told also that the colt is borrowed. Now what kind of king is this?

All of us know the story. Rev. William Carter, of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, notes that Jesus was born in a borrowed place and laid in a borrowed manger. As he traveled, he had no place of his own to spend the night. He rode

into the city on a borrowed colt of a donkey. He ate his final meal in a borrowed room. He was crucified on a borrowed cross, wearing a borrowed crown that the soldiers, in mockery, stuck upon his head. And when he died, somebody placed his body in a borrowed tomb.

Jesus was a borrower. He did not grasp or grab what did not belong to him, but shared what was given to him freely. As the early church pondered the identity and character of Jesus, it declared, "He did not count equality with God as something to be clutched." Jesus did not hold onto heavenly glory and throw his weight around. He never forced himself upon anybody. But rather, He gave himself completely away for the benefit of others.

And He commanded the same of those who followed him. You may recall the instruction to his disciples: "When you go out to proclaim the good news, take no money, no knapsack, no extra tunic, no extra shoes, not even a walking stick. Take only a word of peace, borrow the bed given to you, and proclaim that God's kingdom has come very close."

At its core, the Good News of God does not need a lot of props. What it needs is the kind of people who believe that good news and simply proclaim it.

That is remarkable, especially in our culture so bent on consumption. Materialism infects a lot of otherwise Christian people. Some churches buy a lot of fancy equipment to razzle-dazzle the crowds. They crank up the volume to amplify what they say. They put on a good show because they have been seduced to think the Gospel depends on having a lot of glitz. But today we remember Jesus as the One who borrows a donkey colt to make that triumphal entry into Jerusalem in such a way that leads not to imperial glory, but rather leads to a cross.

Perhaps today is one on which we need to ask, "Who are the real blessed ones?" Jesus says they are the people who don't have very much: the poor in spirit, those who mourn the loss of a loved one, those who are meek, those who are hungry for food and thirsty for righteousness. These are the blessed ones, says Jesus. Who are the blessed ones? They are those who keep a light grip on all that they have, for they know that everything in life depends on the generosity of God.

It's like the guestmaster at a Benedictine monastery who described why he kept no possessions other than the clothes on his back. He explained, "If your closet is empty, there is more room for God." Contrast that to the child who steps over piles of dirty laundry on the floor and says, "Mom, I have nothing to wear." Or the adult surrounded by all the latest books, DVDs, and electronics who declares, "I'm bored and I have nothing to do."

There is a beauty to simplicity, to not owning much and needing very little. Those with this freedom will pay attention to the people around them. Little distracts them from the deep needs of the world. Nothing competes with their imagination or faithfulness.

From everything we know about him, Jesus, like the peasants of his time, owned very little. But what Jesus *did possess* was of infinite value. He possessed a deep knowledge of the scriptures. He knew the prophets expected the true ruler of God's people to be completely humble.

Jesus possessed a deep sensitivity to the world's deepest needs. He paid attention to the hurts of poor and rich alike, comprehending the forces that twist a good person out of shape, seeing how forgiveness can cancel every ongoing hurt and always healing the minds, bodies, and spirits of the people in his path.

Most of all, his greatest possession was a love for every single person. His love was never a hovering, needy love, but rather a willingness to give what he could for the well-being of those around him. In the words of the early church, Jesus emptied himself. He humbled himself.

As one writer put it: Jesus "manifests a God whose very being is not acquisitive, but self-giving..."

So today we remember Jesus who was a different kind of King. He was an itinerant preacher, healer, and the friend of many who hailed him as their Saviour. And he was killed by Empire, the rulers and power brokers of his day, because he challenged the status quo; he upset them in their comfort and security; he became a nuisance to those who could not tolerate more than one king.

On this Palm Sunday, we shout our hosannas. A week from now we will shout "He is risen!" But we must not forget the events that mark this Holy Week. For it is in this week's journey that we come to understand more fully the Jesus whose passionate call for justice and inclusion won for him the scorn of many; and whose self-giving love remains as an example for us to follow.

As we move forward from this Palm Sunday with its parade of "Hosannas", as we prepare for the Easter celebration, may we allow Jesus' example to inspire us to forfeit the gospel of comfort and prosperity for the gospel of self-giving love and wisdom. May we walk the road with him to the upper room on Thursday; to the cross on Good Friday, so that we may prepare for Easter aware of what it means to seek justice, to resist evil, and to let love be the guide in our decisions and actions. May we walk the way of the cross so that we may truly celebrate the gift of resurrection. Amen.