

Luke 19:29-44

Palm Sunday is one of those ironic and iconic festive events. We enjoy the children coming in waving their palms, singing joyful music. As we watch and participate we often rush from the parade to Easter Sunday. However, we need to see the parade and its outcome - the cross. Why the cross?

“As the time drew near for his return to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” And so the journey toward Jerusalem that was set in motion at the start of Lent began.

Immediately after that, Jesus was rejected by a Samaritan village. James and John wanted to call down fire to destroy those Samaritans, but Jesus rebuked them and they went on to another village. That event was a prelude to what will soon take place in Jerusalem: the deadly rejection of Jesus, his refusal to take revenge on his enemies, and his determination to follow God’s call wherever it would take him.

But did God want this to happen? It seems that every event was pre-arranged. The donkey was tied where Jesus said it would be and the owners asked the exact question Jesus predicted: “Why are you untying the colt?” They raised no argument when the disciples answered as Jesus instructed: “The Lord needs it.” Perhaps the owners of the donkey were also followers of Jesus. We cannot be certain how Jesus knew about the donkey – or how he will know about the man carrying the water jar in preparation for the Passover meal which we will hear on Friday.

Palestine was known as a small, troublesome province. There was always unrest, especially at Passover. Danger lurked. Every year the Roman army would come marching in. In the time of Jesus it would be Pilate at the head of the parade. It was a symbol of dominance and oppression. The parade would be full of soldiers and their weapons. It would be full of pomp and circumstance as a warning to the people. Think of those images where the invading army comes in with its might to tell the people they were nobodies. So this parade would not be one the citizens looked forward to, because they knew it as a warning not to cause trouble during the Passover.

Like all military parades, it would be full of banners and images of past victories. It would be led by horses and chariots. The governor rode a white stallion through Jerusalem - in through one gate and out the opposite. It was a show of force, intended to intimidate and frighten. It always sent terror through the city.

So what does Jesus do? In a mocking parody of the governor, he rides a donkey, a lowly beast of burden in the opposite direction. He enters through the gate that Pilate exited from. The action is itself a parable - a reversal story. It turns the power of Rome on its head and mocks it. It dis-empowers the Roman military. Pilate needs a whole legion to demonstrate his importance and control the population.

But Jesus is accompanied by ordinary common people who lay down their cloaks in front of him. His power is rooted in relationships of abundance and joy, in the overwhelming, everlasting love of God and in God's desires for the good of the

world and all its creatures.

The gospel writers tell us that this event was not accidental. Jesus planned it ahead of time. He knew what he was doing and he knew the risk he was taking. He knew he was risking the wrath of Rome by provoking the authorities. And eventually they caught up with him.

Jesus had already predicted three times what will take place in Jerusalem, things that remain hidden from his disciples. Jesus knows that being faithful to God will lead him into the heart of danger, but this does not mean that God wanted him to die. Rather, Jesus' death was an act of violence brought about by threatened human men, as sin, and therefore against the will of a gracious God. It occurred historically in consequence of Jesus' fidelity to the deepest truth he knew. That deep truth set him on this journey to Jerusalem and he will not be stopped now that he and his disciples have arrived at the Mount of Olives.

As Jesus rode along on the borrowed donkey, people spread their coats on the road. We expect them to be waving branches of some kind, even though palms appear only in John's gospel. But in Luke's Gospel, no one is waving branches here, only taking off their coats. Were these people from Bethphage and Bethany or had they followed Jesus from Galilee? We're never actually told.

Perhaps it depends on how we interpret the word "disciples." Luke tells us "the whole multitude of disciples began to praise God." A whole multitude must have been larger than twelve! As they moved into the city, they sang without a bulletin or

a hymnal: “Bless the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” as we heard in today’s Psalm.

At Jesus’ birth the angels herald his arrival with an acclamation to shepherds in the fields: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

As the time of his death draws near, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is heralded with a similar acclamation, this time, sung by the multitude of Jesus’ disciples to the people they encounter along the road: “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

In one sense, this is a continuation of the themes of peace and glory in the establishment of Jesus’ messianic kingship that has permeated the Lukan narrative from the start. However, in another sense, the change from earth to heaven represents a marked shift in the politics with which Luke depicts Jesus’ reign. No longer is Jesus’ reign (if it ever was) understood to bring peace on earth. Instead, it is understood that Jerusalem (as representative of the whole country) is, in its present reality, incapable of living into the real peace of the messianic kingdom. The human divisions are too great.

“Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” To some authorities, it sounded like a dangerous song: Blessed is King Jesus – we shall not be moved! Peace in highest heaven – we shall not be moved!

Who were these people who had seen Jesus' deeds of power? Zacchaeus, whom we met last week – was probably up in front. Jesus had just stayed with him in Jericho and that encounter changed Zacchaeus forever. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James must have been there for they'll be remembered by name at the empty tomb.

Other women were there, too, because Luke places them at the cross on the day of Jesus' crucifixion. Maybe the woman who anointed Jesus' feet at Simon's dinner party was there. Jairus and his daughter might be there, too, walking with the woman cured of the twelve-year haemorrhage. The woman who had been bent over for 18 years is standing tall and there are lots of children – for Jesus made it clear they were always welcome.

These were the ones who had seen Jesus' deeds of power. But, when religious leaders claimed their own special inheritance, John the Baptist said, "I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." Now those stones had come to life! People treated like nobodies were walking like somebodies! It was glorious. It was scary. Do we really want stones to come to life? Do we want to invite the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame into the sanctuary? Do we want people praising God who can't find the right page in the hymnal?

"Teacher, order your disciples to stop." "I tell you," said Jesus, "if these were silent, the stones would shout out." Who is shouting to be heard **this** Holy Week? Followers of Jesus are called to listen to those who have been silenced. When we

do, the Gospel comes alive in radically new ways. Who is longing to be heard where we are?

The man with Downs Syndrome who delivers the mail in your office building; the women and men who come to community lunch in the church basement; the immigrant women who care for our aging parents; the transgender homeless teenager at Covenant House in Toronto; the man who stands outside the grocery store every day with a cup in his hand. What stories do they long to tell? Will we walk past without stopping? “I tell you,” said Jesus, “if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

When we refuse to listen or see those who have been silenced, we hear Jesus weeping once again over our cities and our churches. “If you, even you, had only recognized on that day the things that make for peace!” Jesus seems to speak to us when he says, “even you,” looking beyond that day in Jerusalem into our own time. Jesus will not call down fire upon his enemies. His face is set on God’s mission and he will not turn around until all is accomplished. Jesus rides into Jerusalem sustained by the words that will be his last from the cross: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

The Cross was used by the Romans to destroy the identity of the one who was crucified. It was to wipe them out of history and experience. It was to make them a nobody. It was used on slaves, and those who were a threat to the power of Rome.

It was never used on those who were citizens, only on those whom Rome considered nobodies. It was to wipe out the identity of the person. It was to destroy the person and the symbol for a group, for in doing so it would destroy hope. It was to crush the person and their group or followers.

The cross was not a symbol that a community would want to follow. Yet here it is - a central symbol for the faith. A symbol of a nobody who is resurrected. No one would expect a nobody to be resurrected. Only heroes would be - not a nobody. No one who is on a cross would be resurrected.

The hero could not be a crucified one. Yet it is a nobody who is now the hero of the story. A key to the idea is, ransomed for many. Now we can misunderstand that as payment, for have we not seen many movies - read many novels - of ransom being for money? No the image is not payment. The image is the one who takes our place. It is not taking our place for sin but one who stands with us in our human situation. We have seen images of people who offer themselves for the sake of others. There are actual stories where a leader says free my people and I take their place. The leader puts himself or herself in danger. Martin Luther King always led the marches for civil rights as did Gandhi. This ransom is God standing with us in our reality and with its dangers – God in the midst of our experience.

All these stories tell us that the image of the noble death, of the one who stands in our place, is to make us a noble people. The symbol of the cross is, we live in a dangerous world, and much will be asked of us. Yet the symbol of death has no

power over us. We can be a noble people for we live in the light of the resurrection of a nobody. We can live with danger and with joy. We can overcome.

The parade is held in light of this outcome. Jesus knew it was dangerous to speak his message that the kingdom of God is here, in this world if we but listen and see. Jesus knew that his message was a challenge to the status quo.

He did not think he was sent to die. Jesus was saying God works with the world as it is to lure it to what it could become. This is a call to us to live out of, and in this image of standing for those who need to be rescued. To act in ways that all will enjoy what we enjoy. It is to stand with those who work for the common good even when it seems to be hopeless or dangerous.

For we too, live in an age of empire, and are constrained, dominated, even controlled by its demands. In our country, empire is not an occupation of physical force. Our empire is an empire of ideas, of ideology. Our occupation leaves us with a failure of imagination - of our religious imagination. A feeling of powerlessness, meaninglessness and hopelessness.

Jesus died as one who challenged the principalities and powers of his day. He was the one who, despite danger, continued his mission to announce that the Kingdom of God is to be experienced in the here and now, and it is to help us live a life of virtue. A life of virtue is one committed to the well-being of the common good, to act in ways that restore harmony not create disharmony. He was the one faithful to the love of God, even knowing this path was a dangerous path. He

fearlessly faced the future, a future full of danger. To the end he was faithful.

This is what Jesus was challenging in his ride into Jerusalem. He was offering a different vision of how things could be. He showed all who would look a different kingdom and a different king - the kingdom of God's reign of Shalom, abundant peace. Palm Sunday presents us with a choice, for like the people of Jerusalem, life continually offers us two parades. The parade of singing peasants and children and their impossible, dangerous vision. Or the parade that enforces the world as we know it.

Palm Sunday asks us: which vision of power will rule our lives? To which kingdom will we belong? Which parade will we join?

Amen.