

“Forgiveness and What Comes First”

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Hosanna in the highest! Our eager hearts acclaim
the prophet of the kingdom, who bears Messiah’s name.

So begins the hymn with which we greeted the morning. How ready we are to sing our Hosannas on this day that bears the title, “Palm Sunday.”

It’s not so simple. Like the palm itself, the truth of the accounts of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is layered. Friday afternoon, when I picked up the palms from the florist, I’d forgotten that a simple dozen or so account for hundreds of leaves bound into these rigid stalks. With the florist I stood there separating them. Like an onion, the layers seemed endless. I wondered if there was a core at all.

So it is with this day that we observe as Palm Sunday. Appearances mislead us. The four Gospels of the New or Second Testament all tell us that Jesus entered Jerusalem, each with their own twist. Matthew, Mark, and Luke hold accounts that parallel each other for the most part. The Gospel of John, the latest of the four, bears a tone distinctly different from the other three, with only a passing reference to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. The account that most intrigues me is Luke’s. After Mark, Luke is the oldest of the gospels that made it into the canon, the recognized body of Scripture deemed so by the early Christian church.

It was Passover time. Jesus and his disciples wanted to be in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Seder. Word had spread that Jesus was approaching. He sent off two of his disciples to fetch a colt – actually a colt and an ass in Matthew, a colt only in Mark and Luke, and in the enigmatic John, “an ass’s colt,” with explicit reference to the prophet Zechariah: “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on an ass’s colt!” Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree that Jesus asked two of his disciples to go to a place where they would find a colt tied up, to untie him, and if anyone should ask what they were doing, to reply simply that the Lord has need of it and would bring it back shortly. Upon their return, the disciples heaped their own garments onto the small creature, helped Jesus onto his back, and the procession began.

In the excitement that commonly surges in crowds, bystanders threw their garments onto the dusty, mud-caked road. This didn’t seem to be enough. Some took branches from the nearby trees, palm leaves – perhaps stopping to peel them, perhaps not. Along with their garments, they spread the palms along the road, and they sang their Hosanna’s!

“Hosanna!” We sing it; we want to shout it like the villagers on the outskirts of Jerusalem two millennia ago. It means, “Save us!” Jesus of Nazareth, astride a lowly colt, probably with sandle-clad feet dragging in the dust, entered Jerusalem – where in a few days he would be betrayed, unjustly tried, and crucified – to the cries on this day of “Hosanna! Save us!” from a crowd desperate for salvation from empire. Here surely was the longed-for Messiah, the king heralded by Zechariah.

Let's return to Luke's story. As the Hosannas grew dim and the palm waving and the cloak spreading receded into the distance, Jesus drew close enough to Jerusalem to see it. According to Luke,

“As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” (Luke 19:41-42)

What did Jesus know that others didn't? Perhaps Luke, writing after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE provided this “prophecy by hindsight” into the events of that day. Perhaps Jesus was witnessing Jerusalem attuned to what was at play in this city imploding with oppression and spiritually bankrupt. Jesus' tears are the shadow side of Palm Sunday. He wept not from a foreboding of what was to happen to him – betrayal by one of his closest followers, denial by another, arrest by the centurions, his trial at the hands of the tormented Pontius Pilate, the long walk marked by a crown of thorns, and the crucifixion. He wept not from dread, but from a profound sadness over what he beheld, the blindness of those who praised him and those who inhabited the city to what it really takes to make peace. “...they are hidden from your eyes.”

He wept also because he was attuned to the desperation of peasant bystanders and attentive to the rhythms of another procession on that day. Jesus rode humbly on the back of a colt, heading into Jerusalem from the east. In regal garb, astride a high horse, a chariot perhaps, rode Pontius Pilate in an imperial procession approaching Jerusalem from the west. Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan explain:

“...Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus's crucifixion.”

Borg and Crossan note that Mark, author of the earliest Gospel, would have known of this second procession, for Mark wrote at the time of the imperial victory over Jewish reformers who had daringly tried to take back the city from the powers of Rome and its satellites, powers that had co-opted the Temple itself into the service of a domination system. Pilate, as the designated ruler of the emperor Tiberius, must be in Jerusalem for this and every other Jewish holy day to ensure that there would be no trouble, no challenge, in this outpost of the Empire, as thousands of Jews flocked to the city to celebrate Passover.

As an imperial city, the concerns of Pilate and company were well founded. It was only a few years ago, when Jesus was a young child, that the Jews had known the brutality of Herod, appointed by Rome as King of the Jews and a recent convert to Judaism however despotic he was toward any Jews reluctant to bow to his authority. At Herod's death in 4 CE the Jews revolted. Roman legions were sent in from Syria and presided over a mass crucifixion of 2,000 Jewish rebels! It was the brutal form of capital punishment decreed for anyone who would not concede imperial authority.

Once the rebellion was crushed, it was clear that a new arrangement was needed. The kingdom once ruled by Herod was now divided into three parts, with Archelaus overseeing Judea and Samaria and ruling from Jerusalem. Archelaus kept his job for two short years, at which point things changed dramatically. The temple, once the sacred space of Jewish devotion, became the

political hub of Roman dominance. Wealth and power joined hands in the offices of the temple authorities – in the language of Mark, “the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes.” During Jesus’ public ministry, Caiaphas was the high priest in charge. Pontius Pilate was the governor. The soul of the temple had been sold. Borg and Crossan describe the resulting system as three-fold in form:

oppression of the many by the few;
economic exploitation of the poor by the wealthy; and
the use of religion to legitimate oppression and exploitation

The new temple religion flew in the face of all that Jesus knew to be a faithful practice of his Jewish forebears. It was dominating, not covenantal. Justice was punitive, not compassionate. Forgiveness was to be meted out ONLY by the temple authorities beholden to imperial authority. Surely God was on the side of the powerful, albeit power mongers!

Is it any wonder? Is it any wonder that Jesus wept over Jerusalem, as he entered the city in a procession of peasants desperate and hopeful for liberation?

Two processions headed for Jerusalem, one embodying the power of empire, the other embodying the power of another way altogether. Not even the peasants who waved their palms and spread their garments on the road heading east completely understood this other way. Nor do we understand today, or we would not be in the state we are in as we mark this week yet another year of power unbound and abused. The way of Jesus was different. We are still learning. As Unitarian Universalists, as Christians, as Jews, as Muslims, as Hindus, as Buddhists, as humanists, we are still learning another way. And like the Jerusalem of two millennia ago, we easily succumb to a willful blindness to, in the words of Luke, “the things that make for peace!”

The way and teachings of Jesus were an unprecedented threat to a system of domination, a system that ruled by fear because any who dominate are always afraid. Fear is the only known tool by which to sustain such a system.

Jesus’ way was different. In his life and his teachings, he burst through the bondage of fear. It wasn’t just fear of the secular rulers or the religious leaders in cahoots with secular powers. It was the fear held by Jesus’ friends and acquaintances of the “other” however the other was defined. The parable of the caregiving Samaritan says it best. Jews abhorred Samaritans and took pains to avoid them on roads, in marketplaces, wherever. A “good Samaritan” was an oxymoron in the visceral values that held sway. What did Jesus do but to use the values of the Torah, Jewish law, as leverage in telling his story. Serving human need reigns supreme in the Torah. So how is it that a Levite and a priest both passed by what was clearly a man who had been robbed and beaten nearly to death on the road to Jericho? Then comes a Samaritan; he stops, gathers up the man, takes him to an inn, and pays for his care until he is well.

“That parable,” writes Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, “was a challenge to the defining prejudice in first-century Judaism.”

Jesus called people into a new humanity that broke tribal boundaries of fear and prejudice and power, no matter who held the fear or the prejudice or the power – Roman authorities, temple dignitaries, or the fellow Jews abused by both but harboring their own assumptions of who mattered and who didn’t. Here was a person who transcended fear itself. One needn’t understand him to be any more divine than anyone here this morning to reflect with astonishment upon his life and teachings. Writes Spong:

“...when a human being appears in history with a greater ability to love than we have ever knowingly witnessed before, when this life calls us into a new human unity and refuses to be bound by the rules that rise out of our incompleteness and our fear, then we inevitably look at that life with awe, perhaps even with worship. Love is a presence and power that call us out of tribal fears for it embraces Jew and Gentile, and out of prejudice-spawning fears for it embraces whoever is our Samaritan...”

Of course, of course, Jesus was a threat to the powers that were and the powers that be. Can you imagine two more contrasting processions into a city both holy and corrupt, a city riding a historic recycling of creation and destruction, sanctity and profanity, promise and despair? Where was the release from the cycle that seemed to define the human condition? Where was the liberation for which the peasants on the side of the road were so desperate?

Jesus' way was different. It was the way of what Spong calls “boundary-breaking love,” a love that reveals the Ground of Being, whom some call God. Yet Jesus embodied this love no less than any of us might do if we understand his life as the art of the possible – breaking the boundaries of tribal fears, diffusing prejudice, casting aside the myths of “the other,” speaking truth to the lie that is war, proceeding into whatever Jerusalems we might face humbly, mindfully, attentively.

Jesus' way embodied all-out radical love. Reconciliation, forgiveness, wholeness – all are made possible through this radical “boundary-breaking love.” How true rings the claim of the late Robert Funk, Founder of the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus, known as the Jesus Seminar:

“Love your enemies is probably the most radical thing Jesus ever said, unless of course one considers the parable of the Samaritan. There the admonition is to let your enemies love you.”

Love and forgiveness wind their way through events commemorated today and in the week ahead. The liberation of hope that is Easter is grounded in the contrast that is Palm Sunday, the contrast between love and domination, between hope and fear, between beholding Jerusalem through tear-filled eyes that see clearly and beholding it through eyes blinded by power.

How will we proceed as we enter whatever our Jerusalem is? How will we proceed? Amen.

Sources:

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