

Which Parade?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 5 April, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Palm Sunday

Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21: 1-11

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

On this Sunday before Easter, the image of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, captures an ironic question. Many have said that this was the Triumphant entry, but on a donkey, why not a horse? The children at a Public School gave an answer that was unprompted. They said that Jesus was a humble man and did not want to big-note himself by riding a horse. A donkey was more suitable. A good answer, I thought.

In this unique time in world history, the effect of COVID-19 continues to accelerate. Experts say that the full impact has not yet peaked, and we brace ourselves as news unfolds, and continue to hope for healing. Ironically, an unexpected healing has emerged.

While humanity has shut itself from its activities of production and profit, Planet Earth is beginning to breathe more easily and we see that self-healing happening. As we face this crisis, could it be that we too are in process of healing? During this enforced time of adjustment, we find ourselves in process of re-creation, re-inventing, re-adjusting, re-aligning, and re-focussing.

It is a time of choice. Like the present day, during this uncontrolled virus, we are in similar times of the people of Jerusalem two thousand years ago, of responding to another uncontrollable force ... the Roman Empire. The people of Jerusalem also had a choice.

Palm Sunday presents us with irony and paradox, and Jesus riding a donkey presents a confusing message. Actually, the start of Holy Week that starts today is full of irony and confusion. For the Jews, the reason for this big week had nothing to do with Jesus. It had everything to do with celebrating the deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egypt many centuries before. Everybody was coming from all around to celebrate the event called Passover. And Jerusalem's population swelled enormously ... some say to 2.5 million!

Passover was a big deal to the Jews back in Jesus' day. It still is a big deal today. Passover is the celebration of the Hebrew people's release from Egypt after 400 years captivity. It is and was the single most important time of the year for all Jews as they remember their release as a people of God. Passover ... big deal. It was a very big deal.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem, the celebration of the Passover was about to happen. People from all over Palestine were congregating in Jerusalem, including many of the Rabbis from all over the place. Jesus was not the only Rabbi. He had his followers as did other rabbis, and they all made a fuss of their own rabbi as they entered into Jerusalem. There were crowds ... crowds plural. You can therefore, imagine that when crowds gather, there will always be debate and argument, sometimes volatile interchange.

Enter the Romans. The Romans had a very strong presence in Palestine at the time of Jesus. Even the Romans were nervous about the celebration of the Passover, and so there was heavy recruiting and reinforcing of the Roman army to ensure that peace would be kept in Jerusalem. There was always a volatile presence among the argumentative Jews ... nothing strange about a religious gathering. Lots of religious arguments. Anyone gone to a presbytery or Synod meeting? You know what it's like!

The Romans knew from past experience that the Passover time in Jerusalem was volatile and often led to trouble and violence. It was little wonder, that with the Jews being reminded that they were called into freedom at the time of the Passover, living out their existence was severely challenged by Roman occupation. So, trouble brewed every Passover in Jerusalem for the Romans.

And by the way, at least 90% of the bible is written from the perspective of captive. Captive to the Egyptians, captive to the Babylonians, captive to the Romans. There is not that much left in the Bible where the people of God were not captive.

Back to Jerusalem and Passover at the time of Jesus.

Therefore, it was essential for the Romans to recruit reinforcements into Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. It is plausible to believe that another and opposing parade was happening, at the same time as the parade of rabbis coming into Jerusalem. And at the opposite end of Jerusalem it was the Romans coming in. Conflict was inevitable. Loyalty was a challenge.

The choice was the difference of being good and complying to Roman law, to being a follower of Jesus and being in possible conflict with the Romans.

The struggle between idealism ... with the possibility of persecution, and safety ... with fitting into oppressive rules and regulations, was always going to create a compromise of loyalty. So which side? Which parade? You can imagine the struggle. Which parade do I join? To whom do I show loyalty?

The answer is not obvious when we prefer regulation and rules, and the existence of not taking risks that challenge accepted protocol. It is hard to challenge the status quo and advocate change because it is energy sapping and risky. Which parade do YOU join? Do you cheer on the might of Rome at one end of town, or do you shout praise to Jesus at the other end?

Let us use our imaginations and allow ourselves to live the ideal that we have been taught ... the ideal of joining Jesus' parade. We have been conditioned to do exactly that since we were children. It is the position we assume. It is a position we are supposed to assume. But as we grow older, more realistic, more pragmatic, we think again and wonder ... which parade? Really! Which parade are you going to join?

When this hideous and life threatening virus is behind us, we will have the choice of returning to the normal of the past that was partially oblivious to the needs of the earth and humanity. Or we could embrace the recent discovery of fostering and appreciating what is precious and life giving, for caring for each other, for caring for our environment, for caring for our resources, for caring about life itself and what supports and energises it.

Which parade?

Which parade? Your choice!

The journey from Palm Sunday, through Holy Week, to Good Friday to Resurrection Sunday is a series of choice making. The answers are not easy.

But you are travelling with Jesus as did his disciples and followers. They too made their choices along the way. But God is with you and loves you no - matter your choice.

That is the freedom that God offers you ... God offers you choice!

Which parade? Your choice!