

Palm Sunday and the Walk for Justice – Brigid Arthur csb

On Palm Sunday people who have attended a liturgy in a Christian church will have heard the story of Jesus coming into Jerusalem amid chanting from the crowd – our equivalent might be ‘hurrah’. The story is one from which we can take some meaning, no matter what our background. (The same can be said of many different kinds of stories and cultural narratives.

We have the two paradigms alluded to here played out in the Palm Sunday story. The story is familiar: as the week of Passover begins, (in a time the people lived under the oppression of the Roman rule) Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, not a war horse that the governor would have ridden, and with a ragtag group of men and women followers. People cheer him, shouting ‘Hosanna – blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’. In some ways Jesus looks like a king entering the city – but everything else about the story is anti-king. He had been identified with the poor and excluded – those whose lives were stifled by the Roman military and many of their religious practices.

Less well-known is the historical fact that a Roman imperial procession was also entering Jerusalem for Passover from the other side of the city. It happened every year: the Roman governor of Judea, whose residence was in Caesarea on the coast, rode up to Jerusalem in order to be present in the city in case there were riots at Passover, the most politically volatile of the annual Jewish festivals. With him came soldiers and cavalry to reinforce the imperial garrison in Jerusalem. The leader would have ridden a horse befitting a regal presence.

It is clear what the Roman procession was about. By proclaiming the pomp and power of empire, its purpose was to intimidate and keep control. So what was the Jesus procession about?

As Mark tells the story, Jesus planned it in advance. It was not a last-minute decision, as if he decided to ride a donkey because he was tired or wanted people to be able to see him better. Riding a donkey into Jerusalem echoes a passage from the prophet Zechariah:

“...your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey”. (Zechariah 9:9)

That king, the passage continues, will be a king of peace.

Thus for Passover that year, two very different processions entered Jerusalem. They proclaimed two very different and contrasting visions of how this world can and should be: a world of hierarchy and power, domination and exploitation and a world of justice and the end of violence. The world Jesus talked about was a new world of forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, justice, sight to the blind, liberty to captives, good news for the poor. He says

that healing is taking place as the woman searches for the coin until it is found, the lepers are cleansed and people can be encouraged to share loaves and fishes. Over and beyond all this he says “Whenever you do this to the least of my people you do it to me ... and whenever you refuse to help any of the least of my people you refuse to help me”. (Matthew 25:45)

Jesus was radical. In a tribal world he says there are no tribes. Boundaries then and now give us identity but Jesus preaches no boundaries. The alternative reality that Jesus points to is probably just as pertinent today as it was 2000 years ago. He was against power, privilege, luxury for some and deprivation, exclusion and isolation for others. He preached a dream – a community that is inclusive, without hierarchy, sharing of goods, wealth and food, filled with love, where we love our friends and enemies alike, practice compassion and peacemaking.

Palm Sunday is about this central conflict. The conflict persists – it is about power and conflict and maintaining privilege and often brute force to satisfy some ideology versus equality and respect for all and justice. Palm Sunday and the rest of the story of Jesus being put to death is also about this.

Palm Sunday comes straight after the meal Christians call the Last Supper. I imagine that this meal was populated by the people Jesus got around with – the outcasts, prostitutes, tax collectors.... and some worthy folk who had accepted this kind of community. Here, there were no hierarchies as Jesus washed their feet.

Many in Jesus time and since have literalised his message to support an imperial Christianity – prone to military violence (crusades), privilege, power of some over others. But Jesus presents a different way of being a leader and a person.

He identified with the suffering poor, the throw-away people, the powerless and the humiliated. We can over-spiritualise the gospel – but Jesus was not advocating putting up with the status quo and ignoring the poor – rather that all people could have a life that is good, happy and creative.

On Palm Sunday all are encouraged to support the Walk for Justice. Thousands of people are needed to give a message of hope to asylum seekers and a message of opposition to the way our Government is treating refugees and asylum seekers.

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