

**Sermon: March 28, 2021 Palm Sunday**                      **John 12: 12-26**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore – Rev Greg Wooley**

As our months of pandemic drag on, Palm Sunday is catching me in a way it has not caught me before. Perhaps it is just because the thought of an in-person parade of any sort makes me cringe, especially envisioning it in the cramped streets of Old Jerusalem...but the newfound impact of Palm Sunday goes far deeper than that.

Watch at <https://youtu.be/Y-3PTba64kY>

At Palm Sunday, we envision calls of “Hosanna” hailing Jesus as Messiah. For those who held Messianic hopes – and it’s hard to know how widespread that hope was within the Judaism of the day - the hopes generally revolved around a special, anointed King who would lead the nation to new glory by coming back to a right relationship with God. But what would this Kingship look like? Would the Messiah be a warrior like David, a builder like Solomon, a peace-maker as portrayed by the prophet Isaiah, or something else?

No matter what kind of Messiah was anticipated, this Palm parade, with a meandering, donkey-riding rural prophet at the middle, was the exact opposite of the pomp and show of the actual ruler of the land. In their book, *The Last Week*, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg put forward the idea that this procession by Jesus was not just the *theoretical* opposite of what you’d expect of a King; it was the direct *physical* opposite of a forceful military procession in Jerusalem, happening at the same time.

Each of the four gospels places Holy Week more-or-less within the timeframe of Passover. We know how important Passover was to the religious life of the Jews, and that it had political overtones that the Romans would also have been well aware of, as a time when the people remembered their prior enslavement and suffering and the decisive action of God in liberating them. Knowing this political aspect, the Romans made a big deal at Passover time, to show the Jews who was *really* the boss, with a parade of soldiers, chariots, and Pontius Pilate himself. This big, showy parade, posit Borg and Crossan, would have been happening at the west end of Jerusalem at precisely the same time that Jesus and his raggedy band were approaching from the east.

In a worldly sense, it would be ridiculous to even suggest that a small-time, small-town preacher/ teacher/ healer from Galilee would pose any threat to the power of Rome. Yet the power-brokers of the day, the Romans and their local accomplice, Herod, saw to it that this tumble-down little parade on the other side of town was interpreted as treason & blasphemy, and within a week, Jesus was dead.

Picturing a Biblical event within the social and religious context of its original setting, or the setting of its first audience, is a key first step for interpretation. But the next step is this: how does this Jesus parade, the direct opposite of the Caesar parade, speak to the world in 2021?

From one vantage point, this notion of Jesus-against-Caesar, Messiah-against-Emperor, oppressed people of faith-against-an uncaring, unyielding governing power, fits in far too easily with a motif that may not be widespread but sure is noisy: that is, treating any public health restriction as if it were coming from Caesar and Rome, designed to make life difficult for all freedom-loving citizens but especially difficult for

Jesus-followers. To me, to align Palm Sunday with present realities in this way does a disservice to the radical, costly path of Jesus, a path that cares more for the vulnerable than for the privileged, a path toward a whole new way of being. If we understand what Jesus was about, and his call to an *uncomfortable way* of justice, peace and life, rather than a return to *comfortable inequality*, we must find other ways to understand Palm Sunday, and who, at present, is playing the role of Caesar.

Recent events in southern Alberta suggest to me, that the role of Caesar is being played by the various “isms” that ensure that life is not lived on a level playing field. Whether it’s racism, sexism, classism, nationalism, ageism, ableism or any other systematized way that gives automatic advantage to some and automatic disadvantage to others, it seems to me that is these forms of discrimination play exactly the same game as Caesar and the Roman overlords. This past weekend we heard unsettling reports out of Calgary: one visual image, of a demonstrator at an anti-restriction rally, bedecked with white supremacist symbols, winding up and punching a counter-protestor in a wheelchair; and the story of two young women wearing hijab being attacked by another woman, punching and kicking one of the women in particular and tearing her hijab. And across Canada, many people of Asian descent are fearful of going out in public, for all the COVID-related insults and threats that get hurled their way. As we realize how broadly held these attitudes are, how they destabilizing things while at the same time defending the mechanisms of societal imbalance, we see that the forces of Caesar are alive and well in this land, and many lands.

The group heralding the arrival of Jesus, and the inclusive, egalitarian realm he said was already within reach, were up against an Empire that had everything stacked in their favour. If we fast-forward to Palm Sunday 2021, those who herald the leadership of Jesus continue to yearn for his new way of inclusion and equal opportunity, a new realm of justice for all, a place of redress and reconciliation for the broken promises with Indigenous peoples. Those waving Palm Branches today seek a “new normal” built not on the old assumptions, but on the hopes expressed by Dr King so long ago: a place where our children will be judged “not by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

And while I don’t want to fall into a full-on “good vs bad” binary on this, I am quite prepared to name the “isms” – and in particular focus today, racism – as a ruler that needs to be toppled. And I launch into this, recognizing that I have indeed lived a privileged life: I’ve had some meagre years but I’ve always had food and shelter and access to medical treatment; I didn’t have to quit school early to help with the family farm or the family business or to escape the family violence; I have the mixed societal blessing of being a Christian, absorbing a bit of ridicule on social media but with nothing resembling the virulence of attack levelled at followers of other religions; and then there are those classic white privileges that come to me based on my ethnicity and my skin tone and my gender and my sexual orientation. And with those classic white privileges, I can shop where I want and live where I want, I can go for a walk without worry, I can hold hands in public with my beloved, I can work where I want and get compensated at or above the salary scale. So many people in this world start their life’s journey many steps behind, and find that the rules of the game are geared to increase that deficit. Yes, there are “success stories” of people from visible minority groups who have played by Caesar’s rules and won, but in so many parts of this world, the scourge of racism is

getting worse. Is pandemic fatigue playing a part? Yes, it sure is, *and* that gives *no excuse whatsoever* for perpetuating a system that bestows automatic advantage upon some over others.

As those who walked with Jesus discovered, challenging Caesar doesn't just happen on its own or without cost. Caesar enjoys his advantages, and Caesar will do whatever possible to normalize the way things have always been, trivializing the hardships of the oppressed and/or blaming them for their situation. As The United Church of Canada seeks, not just to name racism as something we do not approve of, but to learn and act and make changes to become a non-racist, anti-racism denomination that seeks a world with those same qualities, we may well find it to be a tangled, complicated thing to do, with lots of reasonable folks raising what seem like reasonable objections. But, my friends, that's exactly the path that Jesus walked: through the deep self-discovery of wilderness time, through a ministry that defiantly proclaimed peace and justice in the face of the oppressors and amidst the dissent of its own followers, a way of being that said that the concept of "neighbour" begins with those we have least in common with, not most in common with. And it is a path that walks a heartbreaking final week of confrontation and betrayal and crucifixion, and through the cross, to the new life of Easter.

I invite you on this Palm Sunday, to just take some time to really consider what it would mean to herald Jesus with your life on this day... for us as a Church to really herald Jesus with our life on this day...to take up his agenda... to take the risk of the unconventional... to step away from advantages that many of us were born into... to deny the easy way, in favour of the faithful way. The way of Jesus isn't easy in 2021, which makes sense, because it wasn't easy two thousand years ago, either. In the lives of those who can't even imagine what it would be like to experience Christ's promised ways of peace, justice and equality in their lives... in the lives of those with privilege, naming and confronting the ways that privilege is bestowed upon some lives and not others... and in all the murky areas and intersectionalities in between... may God be present to the unfolding of this difficult, necessary journey. Hosanna, and Amen.

Works cited:

Borg, Marcus J & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week*. NYC: Harper Collins, 2006. See esp. pp. 1-30.

Crossan, John Dominic. *God and Empire*. NYC: Harper Collins, 2008.

News links re racism in Calgary and Canada"

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/calgary-police-assault-weapon-protest-1.5959591>

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/calgary-hate-assault-1.5958659>

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/asian-racism-hate-canada-pandemic-1.5959788>

<https://united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/anti-racism>