

PALM SUNDAY, April 5, 09  
 "Crossing the City...."

Mark 11: 1- 11

## INTRODUCTION

- Today's Palm Sunday story is familiar: Jesus enters Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. People acclaim him as Messiah, deliverer.
- He's a strange kind of Messiah- he comes not on a war horse, but on a donkey, a beast of burden, a borrowed one at that. What's really going on here? Two things may help us understand- one: the actual timing of his entry to Jerusalem; and two, the prophetic tradition.
- Timing – It's Passover. A festival when Jews celebrate freedom, deliverance, from former oppressors,- the Egyptians. The Romans, their present day oppressors, are always CONCERNED at Passover time. Pilgrims gather in Jerusalem from all over the country. If there's going to be a rebellion, an uprising, this will be the time. .
- About 30 years previously, the Romans had had to put down a huge uprising at passover.- They crucified 2,000 Jewish men, crosses lined up along the highway-as a warning.
- Since then it's become customary at Passover time for the Roman Governor to leave his residence Caesarea Phillipi, and come into Jerusalem with all his legions, to make a show of force.
- So Jesus is actually entering Jerusalem at the same time as Pontius Pilate. The timing points to Jesus' procession as a kind of a political demonstration, proclaiming the kingdom of God over the kingdom of Caesar.
- Certainly his action fits into the prophetic tradition..
- It was common for prophets to not only SPEAK God's truth, but to demonstrate that truth with an action- For example, Jeremiah, walks around the city with a yoke on his neck to declare that Israel's enemy will defeat them.
- Hosea marries a whore and keeps taking her back, as a sign of God's unfailing and forgiving love for the people of Israel.
- And in today's scripture Jesus' prophetic action is to ride a donkey. Through this action he is indicating what kind of Messiah he is and what the kingdom of God is about.
- Let us listen to the word of God as it comes to us through the gospel of Mark 11:1-11

## SERMON

It was Passover. Two processions are entering Jerusalem. At the Western gate, all of Jerusalem is gathered as Pontius Pilate and his legions make their annual entry into the city.

It's a magnificent spectacle. Sunlight gleaming on thousands of spears, and on the Roman Eagle inscribed with the name of Caesar Augustus, Son of God.

The crowds stand silent beside the drum beat of marching feet, the snort of horses, the clip of hooves on stone, the groan of leather, the grind of chariot wheels. Their eyes are watchful, curious, awed, afraid, smouldering with anger, resentment.

At the opposite end of the city, through the Eastern Gate there's quite a different procession. A small group of people laugh and sing, wave leafy branches, do a kind of dance, bowing down and standing up repeatedly, as they lay their cloaks on the ground before a man on a donkey.

They shout, "Hosanna! Hosanna!", which means "save us! Deliver us!" "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!"

Can they be serious? Pontius Pilate in all his splendour and might is entering Jerusalem, and they're calling on an unarmed man on a donkey to save them! Would WE choose to join that little procession in the face of the might of Rome?

Pontius Pilate's procession is all about power. Oppressive power. It's about using power for one's own gain. The kind of power that divides – divides the oppressed from the oppressor, the haves from the have nots.

What power can there be in Jesus procession, that can possibly come against the oppressive powers of this world?

Jesus' power is in some way summed up in the image of the donkey that he chooses to ride.

Zechariah prophesied that the Messiah would come riding on a foal, a colt, a young donkey, and this was understood to be an image of peace- that the Messiah would bring peace. The power that Jesus brings is the power of peace making, not the power of war.

A peacemaker stands between warring sides, but does not choose sides; a peacemaker stands firm in the face of evil, but does not do evil; a peacemaker is willing to die, but not to kill.

A peacemaker does not judge or condemn, but loves the wrongdoer as well as the victim. A peacemaker seeks to transform those who do evil, and to reconcile the wrongdoer with those wronged. In Jesus way there is real power to transform the world.

The donkey that he rides has never been ridden before. We might say that even today Jesus way has hardly been tried.

Jesus includes his followers in the prophetic action. He sends them to untie the donkey, to release it, to say the words, "The Lord has need of it". Jesus followers, ourselves, have a role to play in releasing into God's service Jesus way of peace.

The donkey itself is, for me, a Christ image. An image of one who bears another's burdens. One who serves with steadfastness, gentleness, strength. This is what the Lord needs.

Not a war horse that charges and tramples, but people who take on the burdens of others, and so become part of Jesus' way, that heals and brings real change.

Pilate's procession is always trampling the world. Every night on the news we see some new act of violence, oppression, evil. We're fascinated by it. The media feeds our fascination. And we can become quite overwhelmed with the way this world is, and can become lost in a sense of despair and impotence.

We need to know that always, always, in some quiet corner, there is another procession going on. And we can choose to join it.

We can choose to turn our backs on the power and the pomp. We can cross the city to the other side, to join Jesus' procession. We can choose to pay attention to the lowly, gentler way. To take it seriously, maybe even become part of it.

I don't often get to see movies these days. But curiously in the last week I saw two movies that happen to encapsulate these two different processions, two different kinds of power. The one movie was "The Reader", and the other was "Stronger than Fire" the story of Eva Olsson.

"The Reader" is set in post holocaust Germany. Hannah Schmidt is portrayed as a practical woman who does what needs to be done. We first encounter her as she is cleaning up vomit, cleaning up the 15 year old boy who has just been sick, and taking him home.

She does it because it needs to be done. She's likeable. But we come to realise that there is some kind of gap in her. She seems to be missing a sense of morality.

She later seduces this 15 year old boy. Takes no thought for any effects this may have on him in the future. She just responds to what is in front of her in the present.

We see her again some years later on trial at Nuremberg for war crimes. Apparently she had been an SS guard in a women's camp. The prosecutor asks her, "WHY did you send women from your camp to Auschwitz, KNOWING that they were being sent to their death?"

SHE looks at him incredulously. Then explodes- she says, "It's OBVIOUS why! More women kept ARRIVING -there wasn't ROOM for everyone. We HAD to get rid of some."

There is a stunned silence. She looks at the prosecutor, "Well, what would YOU have done?" Embarrassed silence. She answers her own question. "I suppose I should not have taken the job with the SS".

She is naming the tragedy of humankind. We make a decision and we never know the full implications, until we're living it. Our sight is partial. We do not have complete foresight. And we're all living within the parameters of decisions we've already taken.

We do our best to survive within those parameters. This is not an excuse- it's just how it works. We have a lifestyle, we have a budget. We do our best within those parameters. It may mean that we don't ask whether our clothes come from sweat shops, because those are the clothes we can afford.

Or we don't ask if the chocolate we buy for Easter was grown in Africa by enslaved children. We don't have the time to find Fair trade chocolate.

Evil does not necessarily come marching in with pomp and splendour- it's made up of a thousand small decisions of people trying to do the thing that is right for themselves within the boundaries they find themselves in.

This week on the news there were predictions of massive violence and millions of people dying in Africa, as a fallout from this present recession. No one has planned to commit this evil.

Some, we might say greedy people, made decisions that appeared right for themselves, and they gave no thought as to how collectively these decisions could harm anyone else. This is not an excuse- it's just how it works, that we operate with blinkers.

And then this week we learn that the Afghani government has signed a law confining women to the home and legalising domestic rape. How did WE get there? How has it happened that OUR armed forces whom we thought were sacrificing their lives for JUSTICE, are now actually supporting a government that is unwilling to DO justice.

We didn't PLAN this. Perhaps what has happened, is simply that our mission in Afghanistan has failed. We could learn from this.

Justice does not come from the barrel of a gun. It comes through perceptions being changed, blinkers being removed, parameters widened to include the wellbeing of others. For justice we need to cross the city from Pilate's procession to that other procession.

To Jesus way of peace making. Jesus stands firm in the face of evil, but does not give back evil, is willing to die, but he says those who live by the sword, die by the sword, and nothing has changed. Even in Jesus dying, eyes are opened and lives are changed.

In a final scene in Mark's gospel, a Roman centurion stares at Jesus dead body on the cross, bloody and broken, and he declares "Truly THIS man was the Son of God." (we can read, 'not Caesar, but THIS man ) The centurion has crossed over the city in his heart, from Pilate's procession to Jesus' procession. Transformation. Change.

The second movie that I saw was the Eva Ollson story. Eva Ollson is a holocaust survivor, now 83 years old. For the last 13 years or so she has been speaking about her experience. Primarily in schools. Thousands and thousands of school children have heard her recount her experiences in the camps.

She relates her story to what they can understand. To bullying, for example. They've all either been bullied, been a bully or been a bystander.

Many of them have suffered abuse, or have suffered the loss of a loved one. So when she speaks, she speaks into what they know. Where THEY may be tempted to RUN AWAY, or to be VIOLENT themselves, or to close their eyes to what others are doing, they see in HER an example of ANOTHER way.

What the children see in her firstly, is someone who has experienced incredible oppression and cruelty, and who has SURVIVED. Not just physically, - her HUMANITY has survived. And this gives them HOPE- they too can survive.

And they see in her a way forward, a DIFFERENT way. She tells them that she does not know what HATE is. Her philosophy is that violence has to stop with ourselves. We have to forgive. And they see in her an extraordinary compassion and forgiveness.

They see her courage in being willing to come and share her painful memories with them. They see her courage in her decision to forgive. And they are inspired to do the same. Their eyes are opened to possibilities they didn't see before.

One person, choosing a path of peace and sharing it, is having a huge impact on the next generation. This is how transformation happens. One person at a time choosing that humble procession.

One person at a time choosing peace. Choosing forgiveness. Choosing justice. Choosing hope. You or I could do it in our lives. You or I could release those forces of peace making and justice in the world.

One thing is for sure. The Lord has need of these forces. And the Lord has need of US to release them.

A final image. A picture that I saw many years ago was of man in the mountains of Tibet, crossing a chasm, by the only means possible- walking on a single rope strung across the chasm. But here's the thing;

The man had been carried up to that point by his donkey, his faithful beast of burden. The donkey clearly could not walk across a rope bridge. What the picture showed was the man walking across the rope, with the donkey tied onto his shoulders.

For me that is an image of our journey with Christ. As we become Christ bearers, as we carry Christ in our hearts and witness to him through our ways, we may come up against a wall, a chasm, we may be faced with the impossible, with death itself.

But with Christ all things are possible. Christ who is more powerful even in death than in life, Christ, carries us across any chasm of impossibility, so that the way of peace and justice, will win out in the end.

To God be all the praise, the honour and the glory, Amen.