

PALM SUNDAY

March 25, 2018

Mark 11: 1-11

When I first moved here I was told that Palm Sunday was a celebration time and that I should stick to the happy part of it. Waving of palms, singing of hosannas.....let us have this Sunday as a celebration, they said. Do you remember that? To those people, for today, for this Palm Sunday, I just need to say...sorry.

**This sermon will begin and end with scenes from the news this week.**

**Last Tuesday I think, I turned on the news and they were in the middle of a story**

**And at first I thought I had tuned into something else...what WAS this? a comedy show? an episode of this is that, or SNL or really bad sketch comedy.**

**No, it was the news, and it was a story about teachers being trained in the use of firearms in the classroom**

**And I felt....despair, I think, and fear, and I asked myself is this what we've become**

**And then I thought no, this is not new... this is what we've always been**

**At least in part.**

**AND there is another part of us too**

**And there is choice. We still have a choice. To become....that.....or something else.**

**Does it seem too political to you for me to say that arming teachers in classrooms is the tip of an iceberg and represents a mammoth failure on our part: failure of nerve, of intellect, of ethics and of moral imagination, and frankly, common sense?**

**SURELY we can do better than that. Surely we ARE better than that. Than this.**

**Hold that thought and let's move to the reading for the day. We'll be back.**

**We chose the theme of the heart for Lent this year. We have discovered that in the Hebrew world view, the heart means so much more than it does for us: we use the heart to mean the feelings; the emotions. In the Hebrew language and culture the heart means the centre of a person; the intellect, the will, the emotions too. The core of you. A unity.**

**And we approached the scriptures asking that our hearts be renewed: formed and reformed in the light of the texts. Create in us a clean heart O God, we've prayed. And renew a right spirit within us.**

If ever anyone is tempted to think that these readings are .....quaint little stories for children,

Or dusty antiquated accounts of events that no longer matter

If ever anyone was tempted to think that....I'm asking you – think again. This reading goes straight to the heart of us. Calls for a renewal of heart: of mind, and soul and strength and intent. This stuff is as real and contemporary, at the heart of it, as it gets.

At one level it IS a lovely story. It is. On the surface, if we didn't know otherwise, it would be a nice break from the readings these past few weeks. And we could smile as the children wave their branches....maybe wave a few ourselves.....and it would be ...lovely. But we DO know what's coming.

If this were a series of paintings we'd have been, these past few weeks, in the ...jewel tones, I think. Plums, burgundies, midnight blues, rich golds and the earthy browns of sun ripened figs.

Now though, a change. Now, with *this* painting, in a way that almost makes us blink and turn away - we're in a riot of yellow and bright green – the full light of a Jerusalem mid day with palm branches waving and children laughing splashing one another with the water toys the way kids do in the unbearable heat...splashing each other and aiming for the donkey... the drops of water catching the sun... glowing red in the air briefly, like drops of wine or blood

There's a harsh light to this scene. A light that you just know won't last; that hurts the eyes and brings out detail we'd rather not see.

And there he is....on that donkey. Matthew adds a colt as well. Riding along, laughing with the children as he always does, as that donkey moves slowly, deliberately, toward the city gates.

**This is how Borg and Crossan imagine it.**

*Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year... One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class... On the opposite side of the city, from the west, 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... Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology. (The First Week, Day One.)*

Why is this important? I think it's the whole point of the thing. Israel at this time is an occupied country. The Romans are their conquerors, their oppressors. And, as is true for probably every people conquered by a foreign power, they dream of the day when they will be free. Some dream. Some educate, some wait for the right time...sure that the political tides will turn some day....Some plot violent revenge. Insurrection. Within Israel there were all those and more.

And....Israel as a nation, as a people, their heart is formed and reformed by the story of the Exodus; a time when God through M and M and A

Led them out from under the violent hand of a foreign despot,

Led them to freedom. This is their founding, heart story.

The Passover. And at Passover time every year they tell that story again. And again

People from all over the country travel to Jerusalem at this time of year, for the Passover. The story of their deliverance from a foreign power.

If ever there was a time when tensions were high, feelings were raw, expectations on alert....it was Passover.

The Romans knew that. And so they had extra troops at the ready. Their soldiers were on high alert. There would be zero tolerance for anything that might lead to a riot.

The Romans, to give them their due, wanted peace too. They had to rule a very large Empire, made up of all the nations they'd conquered. Their policy was to let the regions do their own thing, as long as they acknowledged the Emperor and kept the peace. By this time, the Emperor was called...are you ready ?

The Emperor was called prince of peace and son of God and Lord. Citizens of the empire had to acknowledge Caesar as son of God and prince of peace and Lord. OR ELSE.

And "else" meant ....violence in the extreme. Including crucifixion. Peace through violence. Handy little system, that.

My aunt used to say to me "uncle so and so and I never had a fight" and as I got older it dawned on my why that was. I'd think...yea. Because you never crossed him. Because you knew what would happen if you did. Peace through violence. That was my uncle. And that was the Roman way. As long as you did everything they wanted they'd treat you well and leave you alone.

Is that the way to peace?

It works. Kinda.

Is there another way?

Jesus says yes. There IS another way. He IS the way. That's what Palm Sunday is about.

That day in Jerusalem.....the city full of people...the energy high, the possibility for rioting just on the edge.....

And Pilate, the governor, whose job depends on keeping the peace and impressing the Emperor with his ability to keep these crazy Jews in line...Pilate, who isn't often in the city. He has a home on the sea. A

beach house. He hangs out there a lot. Probably plays golf, I don't know...anyway, Pilate decides to have a public display of his power. He organizes a parade of sorts....he marches in the west gate of the city...a big display of power. He's mounted on a white horse....a symbol of military victory. If they'd had tanks or something he'd be in one of those. Marching in with columns of soldiers, weapons at the ready....the sound of boots and the clank of swords and armour

The message was clear. We're in control and don't forget it and we will tolerate no dissent.

And on the outskirts of the city, where anyone coming in would have to pass by, were hanging the bodies of those who had thought otherwise. Crucifixion as a deterrent. Very effective.

Can you picture that? Coming in from the west, Pilate on a white horse of victory. Flanked by armed soldiers

On the other side of the city

Jesus chooses to enter through another gate, on a donkey, nursing a colt, if you go with Matthew, flanked by adults and children waving branches and shouting hosanna.

Which parade are we going to join?

This week I looked back to see what we've said other years on this day. One of my sermons was called "does this donkey have a reverse?" Meaning....is there a choice here?

Is the way set now? Is there only one way for this road to go?

I don't know about that choice

But I do know about this one:

Pilate's parade

Or

Jesus' parade.

The way of violence and power over people

Or

The way of peace with justice and power that frees and strengthens.

Some people would say that in a world like this, the way of non violence is naive and dangerous. What do you think?

I don't know, and I can get very confused at times. But I know this: we need to open our hearts, tune our hearts, to possibilities of peace. And by hearts I mean what the scriptures mean: minds, intellect, wills, emotions. To learn all we can. Not to take what we hear on the news or God forbid read on face book...and let it be that. Learn. Really learn. About other people and systems and ways of thinking. Make sure our intellects are as sharp as they can be so that when we apply our thinking to a thing, we will be bringing an intellect sharpened on the corner stone of the Gospel. And our wills. It's one thing to know something and quite another to act on it. We need disciplined wills, to DO the things we've learned, that make for peace. To do the unglamorous work of peace and justice making in our personal relationships and the making of public policy

And our emotions: we need to do what's necessary to tune our hearts to ways of forgiveness and gratitude and compassion. To practice these things, until we know them how? By heart. By heart.

All of that is to develop the habits of the heart that will lead us to join the parade coming in from the Mount of Olives, with a donkey and the sound of peasants cheering....not the one coming from the west with boots and swords.

One more thing that in my heart seems vital if we are going to tune our hearts to the way of Jesus; the way of peace.

And it is about how we understand and talk about his life and his death.

There is not just one way to understand what his death means. After he died, and his followers experienced his living presence...people tried to express what he had meant to them, how he had touched them, changed them, showed them who God is.

And there were lots of ways people tried to express that. About the 5<sup>th</sup> century, one of those ways of understanding took over and now....almost everyone thinks it's the only way. "JESUS DIED FOR MY SINS" IS THE WAY MOST PEOPLE WOULD SAY IT. The fancy theological way of saying that is blood atonement.

The logic goes like this: God is perfect. YOU are not. In fact, you are bad. Not just bad because you do bad things...but bad at your core. Bad from your birth. So you are bad, And God is mad. And when God gets mad someone has to die. It should be you, because you are so bad. But Jesus steps in and says I'll take it in their place. And so God has Jesus killed and is then satisfied, and if you believe that you get to live too.

If this is what you believe, that's ok...

But here's what everyone needs to know. It's not the only way, it's not the only Biblical way to understand Jesus' life and death, and to follow him

And as we try to have the eyes of our hearts enlightened, as we keep learning how to walk the path of peace, it's important to ask ourselves if this view of a God who gets so angry and demands blood, demands that someone has to die to make things right....is this true to your experience of God? The God of Jesus? Is it true to your understanding of the Holy One that your own intellect, and experience tells you?

If the we keep on holding out a theology rooted in a God who requires death by violence, if the highest most holy thing our hearts can conceive of is a God who demands blood....we will keep repeating that. As above, so below. Or the other way around.

Surely we are better than that. God most certainly is.

I began this sermon by talking about watching the news. Teachers learning how to use firearms in the classrooms

I'll close with another news clip – thousands and thousands of young people calling us – adults – not only the politicians, but us.....calling us to account. That march of young people is heartening. It has the smell of the palm leaf and the ring of hosanna about it.

Can we walk in the way of peace?

Can we teach our hearts to beat in time to a donkey's steady hooves?

The children say yes. The young people say yes. Jesus says yes.

And even if their voices were to be silenced, the very stones would sing it out. And all the people said hosanna.

## FIND THE HABITS OF PEACE

"Christians are prohibited from ever despairing of the peace possible in the world. We know that as God's creatures we are not naturally violent nor are our institutions unavoidably violent. As God's people we have been created for peace. Rather, what we must do is to help the world find the habits of peace whose absence so often makes violence seem like the only alternative. Peacemaking as a virtue is an act of imagination built on long habits of the resolution of differences.... The great problem in the world is that our imagination has been stilled, since it has not made a practice of confronting wrongs so that violence might be avoided. In truth, we must say that the church has too often failed the world by its failure to witness in our own life the kind of conflict necessary to be a community of peace. Without an example of peacemaking community, the world has no alternative but to use violence as a means to settle disputes." -- Stanley Hauerwas