

St Andrew's on the Terrace Sunday March 25 2018 Palm Sunday

Readings for the Gathering

Gospel

Mark 11:1-11

Jesus Comes to Jerusalem

11 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'" ⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" ¹⁰ "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" ¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Contemporary reading

'Palm Sunday' by Malcolm Guite

From *The Word in the Wilderness* (Canterbury Press, Norwich 2014)

Now to the gate of my Jerusalem,
The seething holy city of my heart,
The Saviour comes. But will I welcome him?
O crowds of easy feelings make a start;
They raise their hands, get caught up in the singing,
And think the battle won. Too soon they'll find
The challenge, the reversal he is bringing
Changes their tune. I know what lies behind
The surface flourish that so quickly fades;
Self-interest, and fearful guardedness,
The hardness of the heart, its barricades,
And at the core, the dreadful emptiness
Of a perverted temple. Jesus, come
Break my resistance and make me your home.

Reflection for the Gathering

Last year around Palm Sunday, Brian McLaren wrote about what he sees as the deepest difference in Christianity, saying that it is not the overt and obvious differences like those between "East and West, Protestant and Catholic, High and Low Church, Evangelical and Mainline, Pentecostal and NonPentecostal, or Conservative/Traditionalist and Mainline /Liberal."¹

He writes:

No, the deepest difference in Christianity is the chasm
Between imperial and original Christianity,
Between a gospel of oppression and a gospel of liberation.
In comparison to this difference, other differences are trivial..."²

He then goes on to compare "imperial Christianity", the Christianity which had its genesis in Constantine's fourth century sponsoring of the church, with what he calls "original Christianity", the Jesus Way, the way Jesus lived and taught:

The imperial gospel lives by the sword, the gun, and the bomb of violence; the original gospel lives by the basin and towel of service.

The imperial gospel loves money, pleasure, and power;
the original gospel loves God, self, neighbour, and creation.

The imperial gospel pacifies the masses and makes them compliant with elites.
The original gospel equips agents for justice, joy, and peace for all.

¹ <https://brianmclaren.net/the-deepest-difference-in-christianity-is-not-what-you-think/>

² *ibid*

The imperial gospel follows violent men who kill and rule with an iron fist. The original gospel follows a nonviolent man who touches and heals with his nail-scarred hand.

The imperial gospel sends away children, women, the different, the sick, and the culturally, ethnically, and religiously other;
the original gospel welcomes all, saying, "Come to me."

The imperial gospel is a forgiveness racket, sparing you from torture if you play, pray, and pay by the rules. The original gospel is a journey to freedom, inviting the oppressed and oppressors to be transformed by the one rule of love.

The imperial gospel shows its true colours on Good Friday, with whip, thorn, mocking, spit, spear, and cross.

The original gospel shows its true colours on Palm Sunday with tears for peace, on Maundy Thursday with an example of loving service, on Good Friday with the gracious prayer, "Forgive them!," on Holy Saturday with the courage to wait in silence, and on Easter Sunday with an uprising of life to the full.

The deepest difference in Christianity is not what you think.
It is not what you think."³

I chose my hands very carefully for that piece. The imperial gospel is a right handed religion, in dominant mode, majority-think. The original Gospel is what Martin Luther called 'left handed'.⁴ As Robert Farrar Capon describes it: "Left-handed power is precisely paradoxical power: power that looks for all the world like weakness, intervention that seems indistinguishable from non-intervention."⁵ The left handed power of the original Gospel works from the side least expected. Left-handed people in medieval times were termed sinister – because the sword arm came from an expected direction. In a slightly different sense the original Gospel comes from that unexpected direction not with a conventional sword but with the quiet call which can pierce the heart in quite a different manner from a sword thrust. I would like to add another comparison to the ones Brian McLaren has given us.

The imperial Gospel suits those who love to be right and to have rights.

The original Gospel makes sense to those who, without becoming doormats, are content to make the *Gospel* the point, not themselves.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert Farrar Capon uses this left handed concept of Luther's a lot. Here is a quote from his book *Kingdom, Grace and Judgment*. "Direct, straight-line, intervening power does, of course, have many uses. With it, you can lift the spaghetti from the plate to your mouth, wipe the sauce off your slacks, carry them to the dry cleaners, and perhaps even make enough money to ransom them back. Indeed, straight-line power ("use the force you need to get the result you want") is responsible for almost everything that happens in the world. And the beauty of it is, it works. From removing the dust with a cloth to removing your enemy with a .45, it achieves its ends in sensible, effective, easily understood ways.

Unfortunately, it has a whopping limitation. If you take the view that one of the chief objects in life is to remain in loving relationships with other people, straight-line power becomes useless. Oh, admittedly, you can snatch your baby boy away from the edge of a cliff and not have a broken relationship on your hands. But just try interfering with his plans for the season when he is twenty, and see what happens, especially if his chosen plans play havoc with your own. Suppose he makes unauthorized use of your car, and you use a little straight-line verbal power to scare him out of doing it again. Well and good. But suppose further that he does it again anyway — and again and again and again. What do you do next if you are committed to straight-line power? You raise your voice a little more nastily each time till you can't shout any louder. And then you beat him (if you are stronger than he is) until you can't beat any harder. Then you chain him to a radiator till....But you see the point. At some very early crux in that difficult, personal relationship, the whole thing will be destroyed unless you — who, on any reasonable view, should be allowed to use straight-line power — simply refuse to use it; unless, in other words, you decide that instead of dishing out justifiable pain and punishment, you are willing, quite foolishly, to take a beating yourself.

"But such a paradoxical exercise of power, please note, is a hundred and eighty degrees away from the straight-line variety. It is, to introduce a phrase from Luther, left-handed power... **Left-handed power is precisely paradoxical power: power that looks for all the world like weakness, intervention that seems indistinguishable from nonintervention.**" (pg. 18-19)

"The work of Jesus in his incarnation, life, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension makes no worldly sense at all. **The portrait the Gospels paint is that of a lifeguard who leaps into the surf, swims to the drowning girl, and then, instead of doing a cross-chest carry, drowns with her, revives three days later, and walks off the beach with assurances that everything, including the apparently still-dead girl, is hunky-dory.** You do not like that? Neither do I."

⁵ <http://www.mbird.com/2008/06/robert-farrar-capon/>. Excerpts of Capon's work quoted in a review by David Zahl, 2008

The intersection of this comparison with some of McLaren's other comparisons makes following the original Gospel a complex operation demanding full concentration and focus. The choices inherent in that first Palm Sunday and its aftermath lie in these two Gospel comparisons. Jesus chose a non-imperial mode of transport. The crowd chose an imperial greeting. Jesus will, according to tradition, in a few days choose a non-imperial interpretation of what the temple should be about; prayer not marketing. His opponents will choose every imperial support they can to bring him down.

I remember my parents being terribly thrilled in the 1970s to attend the Oberammergau Passion Play. The Play involves the whole village and is produced every 10 years, to celebrate the saving of the village from bubonic plague in 1633. The tableaux and dramatic action were described to us children in great detail on their return. We can treat Palm Sunday like that – viewing the choices made by Jesus, the crowd, the priests, and the Romans, and Jesus' own followers during Holy Week. Just as at Christmas we delegate the acting-out of the age-old birth narratives to children, so in Holy Week we can leave it to the church to spread out this drama before us again. In that way we keep it external to us, out there at a safe arm's distance. Pilate, Jesus, soldiers, priests of Jerusalem are the actors, we spectate from our safe seats, observers only of the cut and thrust of imperial and original gospels.

I suggest, however, that, for us, each day is a stage on which *we* as the actors in this life drama continually make choices between the imperial and original gospels; between oppression and liberation. Sometimes it is our own oppression or liberation in which we collude. Sometimes it is the oppression or liberation of someone else or a group in our society different from us in which we participate. How does this work? McLaren says "The imperial gospel lives by the sword, the gun, and the bomb of violence; the original gospel lives by the basin and towel of service." We may not use swords, bombs or guns, but our words may cut deep, dismiss, denigrate and deny. Getting down on our knees, metaphorically speaking, with basin and towel becomes too hard, as our knees become stiff from disuse - and I don't mean from arthritis.

As with all choosing, there is a Big Choice to be made – whether or not to arraign ourselves on the side of the imperial or the original Gospel. But then in each moment of our day, we make a multitude of little choices which either confirm that Big Choice or betray it. The speed and multiplicity of these smaller choices inevitably makes hypocrites of us all from time to time. Being consistent all the time is humanly impossible. These on-the-spot-choices demand fine discrimination and discernment within short time frames. When should I stand up for my rights as a matter of justice and when do I need to go with the flow for a greater good? When should I send another away for their own benefit and when should I continue to hold my arms open even though the sacrifice is killing me? When do I imitate Jesus completely? When must I go with my human frailty? These choices might be small and speedy but they are not simple. Like the ads on our smart phones they flash up so quickly, the choice is before us before we are ready for it. Often we commit too hastily.

Jesus made one of those Big Choices when he set his face towards Jerusalem. He then had to follow his choice to enter Jerusalem with smaller, but no less dangerous choices when he saw the confusion in the Temple; when he lifted the bread and the cup at the Passover; when he answered Pilate's questions in the trial room; when he asked for forgiveness for his torturers; when he saw his mother crying at the foot of his cross. He is our exemplar in the art of choosing to follow the original Gospel in everyone of our choices.

Once we bring the choosing off the dramatic passion play stage and into our own lives, we can see more clearly the complexity of the situation.

We can see how hard this is for everyone.

Perhaps we can then forgive each other for the times we fail to choose aright.

Perhaps we can strengthen each other to make original Gospel choices more often

Perhaps together we can resist imperial pressure to conform.

JB Phillips translated the second verse of the twelfth chapter of Romans something like this: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould" but allow yourselves to be re-moulded from within, so that you ... move[s] towards the goal of true maturity.⁶

Let's do that.

Susan Jones 027 321 4870 04 909 9612 minister@standrews.org.nz

⁶ Romans 12: 2 J B Phillips translation.