

St Andrew's on the Terrace 14 April 2019 Palm Sunday Lent 6 'Scootering into Jerusalem'

Readings for the Gathering

Isaiah 50:7-9

⁷ Because I have help, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. ⁸ The One who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who are my accusers? Let them confront me!⁹ It is the Holy One who helps me. Who will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.

Luke 19:28-40 Jesus Comes to Jerusalem as King

²⁸ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say, 'Our Master needs it.'" ³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They replied, "Our Master needs it." ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: ³⁸ "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of God!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" ⁴⁰ "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

"Blessed is the One"

From *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* Jan Richardson

www.paintedprayerbook.com

Blessed Is the One for Palm Sunday

Blessed is the One
who comes to us
by the way of love
poured out with abandon.

Blessed is the One
who walks toward us
by the way of grace
that holds us fast.

Blessed is the One
who calls us to follow
in the way of blessing,
in the path of joy.

Reflection for the Gathering

I never thought I might compare Jesus to a lime scooter! But consider the effect of both these phenomena. The pick-up-an-electric-scooter-anywhere system is new to our world. It's been made possible by a different way of thinking, backed up by an innovative use of new technology. Usually people either own their own vehicles, rent them or catch buses, trains, planes, ferries which run regular routes. The idea of picking up someone else's vehicle and using it for a time then dropping it somewhere else is quite different.

The electric scooter phenomenon has been controversial – scooters are left in inconvenient places on public footpaths; they move at a speed a lot faster than pedestrian speed, they are quiet and sneak up behind you unawares. They are different. Many people do not like it. It is non-establishment. The establishment has been caught on the hop, having to create rules and regulations which cover this novel situation. Jesus isn't too dissimilar. Just like we have known and got used to regular transport and non-electric scooters, then electric scooters that belong to private owners, Israel in Jesus' time was used to itinerant rabbis travelling the countryside. In that sense, Jesus was like any other scooter we have known. But Jesus broke the conventional rules, stretched the known envelope, just as public electric scooters have. He did not take the establishment line. The establishment didn't like it.

We already know that Jesus riding a donkey was a symbolic contrast to the usual sight of a ruler or king or governor riding a horse. We know that horses were associated with war and conquest and victory over a smaller weaker opponent. A donkey was a domestic animal, a beast of burden, and Jesus choose a very young animal as his vehicle of choice. But this has become such a well-known, iconic happening which we take historically for granted that we forget how unusual it would have been at the time.

We also take for granted how much Jerusalem would NOT have loved to have a (presumably unadvertised) parade right in the middle of the busiest week of the year – rather like a Pride Festival Parade happening without warning when a member of the Royal Family was already visiting. People came to Jerusalem for the Passover from all over the Mediterranean – the Jewish diaspora was already large at that time. According to one scholar, “Joachim Jeremias, Jerusalem had a population of about 20,000 to 30,000 people. But at Passover, ... the Holy City's population swelled by perhaps another 150,000.”¹ Imagine that kind of influx taking over of your city! It would be the equivalent of Wellington having an extra 1.5 million people for a weekend.

So Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem was for some just another irritant for this festival week. More seriously for him and the religious authorities, Jesus spoke not like just another of many itinerant rabbis. We are specially told that he did not speak as the scribes but as one with authority.² People listened when he spoke, they knew that out of his mouth were coming important and significant words, they knew he was a force to be reckoned with. That was good news for those people who wanted to hear a different message, one which took note of their poverty and marginalisation, one which spoke to the depths of their despair and to the height of their hope. For those who wanted authenticity, Jesus delivered.

But for those who were busy keeping the rules and maintaining order and discipline within the religious establishment, another locus of authority was unwelcome. Judaism already had several competing groups within it. We know today there are orthodox and non-orthodox Jews, secular jews, and those Jewish by birth but do not practise their religion overtly. Some Jewish people follow a kosher lifestyle and others do not. There are today progressive Jews as well as conventional expressions of Judaism. On a Latter Day Saints website one article devoted to groups within Judaism in Jesus times, for simplicity's sake, divides the eight different groups within Judaism into three major groupings “Political-Religious Sects (Samaritans, Zealots); Social-Vocational Sects (Publicans, Scribes); and Religious Sects (Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Nazarenes).” See – really simple!³

So religious authorities in the temple at Jerusalem had enough on their hands without another jumped up preacher sounding a little too authentic and much too authoritative for their liking.

1. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 84 cited in <https://www.chosenpeople.com/site/passover-in-israel-past-and-present/>

² Matthew 7:29

³ <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/1975/01/major-jewish-groups-in-the-new-testament?lang=eng>

They did not want another leader syphoning off the faithful from the synagogues and temple to his peripatetic cause. Jesus was in trouble.

The phrase “and he set his face towards Jerusalem” is common in Lent. Jesus must have known that his going to Jerusalem was like a small animal entering a not very camouflaged, well-set trap. Yet he still went. He set his face towards whatever would happen. He still travelled to Jerusalem that year as he probably had travelled each year for the Passover along with other devout Jews. Only this time, he was known more widely for his words and his work. This time the whole scenario smelt and felt more dangerous.

I am reminded of Archbishop Oscar Romero, an El Savadorean priest who “spoke out against poverty, social injustice, assassinations, and torture. In 1980, Romero was assassinated while celebrating Mass in the chapel of the Hospital of Divine Providence.”⁴ The United Nations attributed his death to the orders of Roberto D'Aubuisson who two years later became president in El Salvador.

Romero had been known as a socially conservative priest, but he was galvanised into social justice action by the death of a friend just at the time of his promotion to archbishop.

“On 23 February 1977, Romero was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador. While this appointment was welcomed by the government, many priests were disappointed, especially those openly supportive of Marxist ideology. The progressive priests feared that his conservative reputation would negatively affect liberation theology's commitment to the poor. On 12 March 1977, [just a month later] Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit priest and personal friend of Romero who had been creating self-reliance groups among the poor, was assassinated. His death had a profound impact on Romero, who later stated: "When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead I thought, 'If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.'" Romero urged the government to investigate, but they ignored his request. Furthermore, the censored press remained silent.”⁵

Like his friend Rutilio and like their common leader, Jesus, Archbishop Romero, now St Oscar Romero, did not let up in his campaign against injustice, murder and torture. The day before his death he had preached, calling on “Salvadoran soldiers, as Christians, to obey God's higher order and to stop carrying out the government's repression and violations of basic human rights.”⁶ Like his master before him, Romero's life and work and death is now known worldwide. He is depicted in a statue above the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey in London, England, joining Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia and others,⁷ a group of ten martyrs spanning every continent of the world.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%93scar_Romero

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%93scar_Romero

⁶ Ibid.,

⁷ The full list is: Maximilian Kolbe, Manche Masemola, Janani Luwum, Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia, Martin Luther King, Óscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Esther John, Lucian Tapiedi, and Wang Zhiming. The statues were created by Tim Crawley and unveiled in 1998. This picture file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.



We haven't made much progress since the time of Jesus. It surprised me to learn that the twentieth century is the century in which the most martyrdoms ever have happened – forces such as Nazism, racism and dictatorial right wing governments have resisted those proposing a different way – killing those who argue for a route to justice through peace, not for justice being delivered through victory and conquest only.

Often the main symbol used for the Christian faith is the cross from Good Friday. Of course that day is very special. But Palm Sunday marks Jesus' entry into the lion's den as it were. This day is when we begin to see the courage with which Jesus faced his task of telling the truth at all times and in all places. How he took up the burden of the telling out of a new way in which human kind could regard themselves and God; a new perspective on what it meant to be human and how to treat other people as human beings too.

Jesus could have cut and run. I am sure his disciples urged him to more than once, we have one or two accounts of them doing so. We will find later in this holy week that one of his key men funk'd speaking up and identifying himself as one of Jesus' band. We will also see the group's treasurer betraying him to the authorities for money. *They* and Jesus knew the writing was on the wall. *They* and Jesus were scared and frightened. *They* gave in. Jesus did not.

Jesus knew he was as annoying as a lime scooter! But he kept on with the message he was entrusted to deliver. Christian nurse Esther John knew the risks she was taking promoting Christianity in Pakistan, risks which led to her murder but she continued evangelising. Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew the risk he was taking in joining a plot to kill Hitler but he did it anyway. Martin Luther King knew there were death threats against him. Oscar Romero knew he was provoking powerful forces in the El Salvadorean regime but he kept on speaking out. In Jesus' name, nine other twentieth century martyrs on that Great Western doorway stood for the truths of the Christian way, as well as many others who did not make it to the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey.

Who will we follow from this Palm Sunday on?
How will we follow from this Palm Sunday on
- will we cut and run or stay the course?

Like Romero as he looked down at his assassinated friend and said "When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead I thought, 'If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.', we too could say "When I look at Jesus on Palm Sunday, walking steadily into the trap which awaited him, I think 'if they killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path'"

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