

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Thompson
Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019

Palm Sunday: Let Love drive your life!

Text: The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I might know how to sustain the weary with a word. I gave my back to those who struck me and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard. I do not hide my face from insult and spitting. Isaiah 50: 4-6

One thousand nine hundred and eighty-two years ago, the events of Palm Sunday took place. Perhaps you were not aware that there were two processions entering Jerusalem that day.

Through the West gate of the city the governor was entering on a large powerful war horse. There were some 600 war horses, in fact, of Roman Cavalry. There were centurions with helmets gleaming in the sunlight and thousands of foot soldiers. It was shock and awe on a big scale. The soldiers had polished armour made of thick leather also shining in the sun. Some were archers, other bore spears. There was a message here: **Contemplating an insurrection? Don't even think about it!**

Who was this who had come to Jerusalem? It was Pontius Pilate who had travelled to Jerusalem from Caesarea where he had a luxurious palace with all the amenities of the day, including a fresh water swimming pool. He had come to Jerusalem with his wife at the time of the Passover Festival, which the Romans allowed. But there was always potential trouble because there were so many visitors at that time. The Galileans had brought tents and occupied the valley between the city and the Mount of Olives. Jews from around the known world came back at this time of year. So, the city was jammed and restive under the Roman yoke.

The last major uprising had been in the time of Herod the Great, before Jesus was born, around 4 BC. At that time the Romans had entered Jerusalem and put down a rebellion and crucified some 2,000 Jews in Jerusalem who were accused of being a part of the rebellion. So that memory was still strong, and this parade was to reinforce Roman rule. Hence the shock and awe. King Herod was also in Jerusalem and he served under Pilate and he wanted no trouble either. He was there to show that he was a faithful Jew at the time of Passover, as well as someone who was willing to serve the Romans who cemented his position with brute force.

On the other side of the city, through the East gate came a very different procession. It was well known to the Jews at the time that when the Messiah was to come, he would enter Jerusalem in a very particular manner. The old, old prophesy read "Shout with gladness, see now your King comes to you. He is victorious, he is triumphant (but then comes the surprise to those who wanted a political messiah) he is humble, riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Jesus deliberately chose to show up on a donkey as a trigger for the Jewish prophetic imagination. He did not appear on a war horse, but on an animal that was a sign of peace. Instead of spears and an army to proclaim him as King there were palm branches. Instead of legions of soldiers with military might he was surrounded by a crowd with lots of little children.

In terms of the judgement of history who was the realist? Pilate or Jesus Christ?

Hal Luccock a Bible commentator writes;

“We have been given for generations the picture of Jesus as a gentle perhaps deluded sentimentalist, a figure of poetry and art unfitted to deal with the rough realities of the world. [But] Jesus is emerging as a stern realist who injected hard truth into a world ruled by illusion. The real sentimentalists are those fools who imagine that it is possible to build security and peace on a foundation of hate and revenge or of greed and competing sovereignties.”

Kofi Annan one of the great figures of the United Nations once said to the Palestinians “You must stop all acts of terror, all suicide bombings. The deliberate and indiscriminate targeting of civilians is morally repugnant. The violence was doing immense harm to the Palestinian cause.”

To the Israelis he said that Israel must stop the bombing of civilian areas, the assassinations, the unnecessary use of lethal force, the demolitions and the daily humiliations of ordinary Palestinians.

His words fell on deaf ears. The Palestinians and the Israelis are still in the tradition of Pilate. Force is the way forward. The war horse and shock and awe will keep the peace.

Luccock is right. The Israelis and Palestinians, by choosing to build peace and security on a foundation of hate and revenge, are the foolish romantic idealists.

In complete contrast to violence and the use of force, South Africa decided to follow the teachings of Jesus to end apartheid. Instead of a rampage of revenge, Tutu and Mandela set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Never really tried much in International affairs before, there were skeptics everywhere. De Clerk called it a dog and pony show.

But! Incredibly, amazingly, this strategy avoided a complete bloodbath and became a model for the world.

Bishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela, following the pattern and teachings of Jesus, emerged as **stern realists** who had injected hard truth into a world ruled by illusion.

But there are other examples of the stern realist teachings of Jesus which worked in amazing ways.

Think of Gandhi of India. With non violence Gandhi liberated India. If his advice had been followed India and Pakistan would not have nuclear missiles aimed at each other today. They would be allies.

Martin Luther King ended segregation in the USA and preserved the union. He is the only American with his own day in the calendar year. He followed the stern realism of the historical Jesus who said: “You have heard it said in time past an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, but I say unto you love your enemies, do good to those who despitefully use you If someone strikes you on the cheek, offer him your other cheek as well. Don’t resist evil with evil. Overcome evil with good.

Napoleon was a sentimental romantic, committed to the use of force and violence but he came to see this: He said “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creation of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded his Empire on love; and at this hour millions would die for him.”

I think more than anyone who has ever lived, the Jesus of history dedicated himself to **the problem of meaning in life**. His answer was to let love drive your life and if we do this our lives will fill with meaning!

What kind of a love is this? It is a love stronger than death. That is where he was going on Palm Sunday, for he was going to die in Jerusalem, and he knew it. And that should have ended his quest in failure. But on Easter day God vindicated him and raised him from the dead. **As far as the great Creator was concerned this man's teachings about life, love and the enemy were the way forward for human beings.**

This stern realism of the Jesus of history is what the world needs today, for we see on every hand the hopeless alternative of force being used. Think of Russia and the Ukraine in Crimea, or Israel and the Palestinians in Palestine. Think of China in Tibet or Madura in Venezuela, just to name a few, who are still on the wrong page of history.

The teachings of Jesus fulfill the prophesy of Isaiah with which we began this sermon. Isaiah taught that the greatest teacher of the world would be a suffering servant and wherever his teachings are upheld, joy and meaning would come into our lives. Why? Because His words sustain the weary. They sustain us when we are old, and our friends have died; sustain us when we have had to give up our homes and nobody visits us. When everything is a loss, to whom do we go?

What happens when we have been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness? How do we find the courage to go on? Where do we look for strength? For me I would say that the answer to all the problems of meaning in life are found in the teachings of Jesus; because he addressed the problem of lack of love, the problem of aging, the problem of hope and finally the problem of each of us being alone. He addressed the problem of violence and conflict by asking us to love our enemies which no one but Jesus had ever taught as convincingly.

Carl Jung, the great psychiatrist once wrote about meaning and where it can come from. He said: "Among all my patients in the second half of life, that is over 35 years, there has not been one whose problem in the last resort has been that of not finding a religious outlook on life none of them has been healed who did not regain a religious outlook."

I had a friend who was in the Second World War, in the horrors of conflict. On the battlefield with shells falling all around him, he was trying futilely to dig into the mud for protection; dig in with his hands, his feet, his helmet. Finally, he gave up and wept like a baby and said, "God help me!"

As soon as he spoke the words, he said a deep peace filled his whole being. He said "**I shall never forget that. I didn't cry into an abyss. It was as if the black hole into which I was falling had a bottom!**"

I was once driving a famous cancer doctor back to the airport, after a lecture. We were sharing moments when we had felt utterly helpless and had asked God for help.

He and his wife had once moved into a haunted house.

One night his wife had claimed that she had seen a ghost in the main bedroom

Sure, of his scientific skepticism on such matters, he “pooh-pood” her. That is until one night, when he was sleeping alone in the same bedroom and he found himself awake in a cold sweat. Then he said, that there was something awful in the room that was approaching the bed, with terrifying sounds like a kind of deep growling.

He said “ I was utterly terrified, and I went right back to my early Christian roots and cried out, “ Jesus help me”

He said that immediately the presence was gone. He said “David I have never forgotten the help I received that day. I discovered after I sold the house, that someone had been murdered in that room.”

The word King used on Palm Sunday means “ He is able.”

The One who rode into Jerusalem and was called King, said this about the quest for meaning in life: “Seek and ye shall find, Knock and it shall be opened unto you. For the one who seeks finds!”

W.H. Auden once said that history cannot help or pardon us.

I think that that is true of world history and our personal histories. **We need something more. We need to encounter Someone who is really able, a different kind of king or Governor than the one who rode in through the West gate.** We need the man who rode humbly through the East gate, who cared for women and little children who gave his cheeks to those who pulled out his beard, the one who gave his back to the lash. We need someone who can answer our questions at the deepest level at which they can be posed.

There is Someone I would ask you to put to the test, who unlike all the other kings and rulers, really is able. The Messiah rode into Jerusalem that day and one of his Messianic names was Emmanuel, meaning ‘God with us’. **Note the Present tense!**

What drove Jesus to go into danger in Jerusalem? What was his motivation?

It was a love for everyone, a love stronger than death.

The last words that Jesus said before he left the planet physically were these: “Lo. **I am** with you, even unto the end of the world.”

On Palm Sunday, let us remember, that if we let love drive our lives, we will have Great company on our personal life journey, wherever it might lead us, and that is such good news!

Happy Palm Sunday then, from the One who rode in through the East gate. The other parade has faded away completely and is only remembered at all because of the man who entered through the East gate.

Who was the realist?