

Parades and Crosses

March 28, 2010

St. Paul's - Richmond United Church

Last Sunday in Lent

Palm / Passion Sunday

Luke 19:28-40

Read the Bible passage: [Luke 19:28-40](#), The Message; or [Luke 19:28-40](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this post.

The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Palm Sunday is one of those ironic and iconic festive events. We enjoy the children coming in waving their palms, singing joyful music. As we watch and participate we often rush from the parade to Easter Sunday. We need to see the parade and its outcome - the cross. Why the cross?

Palestine was known as a small, troublesome province. There was always unrest, especially at Passover. Danger lurked. Every year the Roman army would come marching in. In the time of Jesus it would be Pilate at the head of the parade. It was a symbol of dominance and oppression. The parade would be full of soldiers and their weapons. It would be full of pomp and circumstance as a warning to the people. Think of those images where the invading army comes in with its might to tell the people they were nobodies. So this parade would not be looked forward to, because the people knew it as a warning not to cause trouble during the Passover.

Like all military parades it would be full of banners and images of past victories. It would be led by horses and chariots. The governor rode a white stallion through Jerusalem - in through one gate and out the opposite. It was a show of force, intended to intimidate and frighten. It would send terror through the city.

So what does Jesus do? In a mocking parody of the governor, he rides a donkey, a lowly beast of burden in the opposite direction. He enters through the gate that Pilate exited from.

The action is itself a parable - a reversal story. It turns the power of Rome on its head and mocks it. It disempowers the Roman military. Pilate needs a whole legion to demonstrate his importance and control the population.

But Jesus is accompanied by ordinary folk who wave palms and sing. His power is rooted in relationships of abundance and joy, in the overwhelming, everlasting love of God and in God's desires for the good of the world and all its creatures.

The gospel writers tell us that this event was not accidental. Jesus planned it ahead of time. He knew what he was doing and he knew the risk he was taking. He knew he was risking the wrath of Rome by provoking the authorities. And eventually they caught up with him.

Understanding the story of Palm Sunday gives us a clue to the nature of God.

God did not plan Jesus' death. God did not desire it. God did not need it for God's salvation of the world and all its creatures to work out.

The Cross was used by the Romans to destroy the identity of the one who was crucified. It was to wipe them out of history and experience. It was to make them a nobody. It was used on slaves, and those who were a threat to the power of Rome. It was never used on those who were citizens, only on those who Rome considered a nobody. It was to wipe out the identity of the person. It was to destroy the person and the symbol for a group, for in doing so it would destroy hope. It was to crush the person and their group.

The cross was not a symbol that a community would want to follow. Yet here it is - a central symbol for the faith. A symbol of a nobody who is resurrected. No one would expect a nobody to be resurrected. Only heroes would be - not a nobody. No one who is on a cross would be resurrected.

The hero would not be a crucified one. Yet it is a nobody who is now the hero of the story. A key to the idea is, ransomed for many. Now we can misunderstand that as payment, for have we not seen many movies - read many novels - of ransom being for money. No the image is not payment. The image is the one who takes our place. It is not taking our place for sin but one who stands with us in our human situation. We have seen images of people who offer themselves for the sake of their people. There are actual stories where a leader says free my people and I take their place. The leader puts themselves in danger. Martin Luther King always lead the marches for civil rights as did Gandhi. This ransom is God standing with us in our reality and with its dangers. God in the midst of our experience.

All these stories tell us that the image of the noble death, of the one who stands in our place, is to make us a noble people. The symbol of the cross is, we live in a dangerous world, and much will be asked of us. Yet the symbol of death has no power over us. We can be a noble people for we live in the light of the resurrection of a nobody. We can live with danger and with joy. We can overcome.

The parade is told in light of this outcome. Jesus knew it was dangerous to speak his message that the kingdom of God is here, in this world if we but listen and see. Jesus knew that his message was a challenge to the status quo.

He did not think he was sent to die. To put it in my terms, Jesus was saying God works with the world as it is to lure it to what it could become. This is a call to us to live out of, and in this image of standing for those who need to be rescued. To act in ways that all will enjoy what we enjoy. It is to stand with those who work for the common good even when it seems to be hopeless or dangerous.

For we too, live in an age of empire, and are constrained, dominated, even controlled by its demands. In our country, empire is not an occupation of physical force.

Our empire is an empire of ideas, of ideology. Our occupation leaves us with a failure of imagination - of our religious imagination. A feeling of powerlessness, meaninglessness and hopelessness.

Jesus died as one who challenged the principalities and powers of his day. He was the one who despite danger continued his mission to announced that the Kingdom of God is to be experience in the here and now, and it is to help us live a life of virtue. A life of virtue is one committed to the well-being of the common good.

To act in ways that restore harmony not create disharmony. He was the one faithful to the love of God, even knowing this path was a dangerous path. He fearlessly faced the future, a future full of danger. To the end he was faithful.

This is what Jesus was challenging in his ride into Jerusalem. He was offering a different vision of how things could be. He showed all who would look a different kingdom and a different king - the kingdom of God's reign of Shalom, abundant peace. Palm Sunday presents us with a choice, for like the people of Jerusalem, life continually offers us two parades. The parade of singing peasants and children and their impossible, dangerous vision. Or the parade that enforces the world as we know it.

Palm Sunday asks us: which vision of power will rule our lives? To which kingdom will we belong? Which parade will we join?

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