

Palm Sunday 2020 Faith Reflections

Today we hear that wonderful story that is so familiar to many of us, the story of Jesus entering the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, with crowds cheering, waving palm branches and spreading cloaks on the road. If we imagine ourselves in the scene, we know that it's a scene of great joy, excitement and hope. The crowds are full of expectation about what Jesus might do for them. People are singing and shouting "Hosanna!" which literally means "Save us!," looking for a Saviour who will rescue them from the oppression they are experiencing under Roman rule.

What we may not know about this story is that on the same day that Jesus entered Jerusalem at one end, another procession took place at the other end. Many Biblical scholars and historians believe that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate paraded into Jerusalem every year on the First day of Passover, which was happening at that time. These two processions were very different: Jesus rode a donkey, surrounded by a crowd of peasants that would likely have included a number of "misfits" – women, children, and tax collectors. Pilate's procession was a display of power and might, with legions of chariots, horses, and uniformed soldiers, dressed for battle and armed with swords and spear. That difference between the two processions was symbolic of what each of them represented. Jesus' procession expressed humility, servanthood and God's authority, while Pilate's was intended to generate fear, respect and obedience from the people, expressing Rome's authority. Jesus' entry was what we might call a "counter-procession": humble, hopeful, and proclaiming a new kingdom, one not based on military force and control, but on sacrificial love and peace.

Of course we know that that sense of joy and excitement surrounding Jesus' procession didn't last long. In a few short days the tone and mood of this story changes radically. A dramatic series of life-changing events take place very quickly for Jesus. The opposition the religious authorities have had to him all along finally reaches its climax as they plot to take his life. Jesus is betrayed by one of his own disciples, arrested and put on trial. The same crowds that shouted "Hosanna!" change their shouts to "Crucify him!" and rejection replaces joyful enthusiasm. From being hailed a hero come to save his people, Jesus is seen as a traitor, condemned to death. And eventually as we know, Jesus is sentenced to death and crucified. That is the story that lies ahead of us today as we enter Holy Week. In the days to come we will journey from the very heights of joy to the depths of despair. It's hard to believe how quickly things can change in just such a short time, and that five days from now we'll be facing the cross, remembering Jesus' crucifixion and death.

How quickly things can change. How quickly our lives and world can change. I've been reflecting on that a lot over the past few days in terms of what's been happening with the COVID-19 pandemic we are in. Things are changing at an incredible pace all around us. If you think back to two weeks ago, or even a week ago, there are many examples of this. Going to the grocery store is now a totally different experience than it once was: we used to see friends and neighbours and maybe stop to visit with them in the store or pick through things in the produce aisle before selecting something to buy. The atmosphere was happy and enjoyable. Now it feels very grim and serious. Some of us aren't even going to the store anymore but having groceries delivered to our home. Other massive changes are happening in the workplaces of essential workers such as Boundary Trails Health Centre and our local Personal Care Homes. Sometimes it feels as if the world is spinning too fast - there's so much to take in about what is happening. This past week I heard someone say "Things aren't just changing by the day - they're changing by the hour. We never know what's coming next." This pandemic is truly a life-changing and world-changing event, leaving many people feeling anxious and afraid about what might come next.

I wonder if Jesus didn't experience some of those same feelings as he watched his world change so dramatically around him. In a very short time everything was overturned: the crowds who greeted him so joyfully with palm branches turned their backs on him, his own disciples and friends betrayed and denied him. We catch a glimpse of how Jesus must have felt in that time he was in the Garden of Gethsemane praying before his arrest. With great emotion he asked God to "take this cup from me". Jesus was human, he knew what it was like to feel afraid. But in that same prayer he also says to God, "Nevertheless not my will be done, but yours." Jesus was willing to surrender to what was happening, to continue on the path that had begun and be faithful to God, even if it cost him his life. He was so committed to the task of sharing God's unconditional love with everyone that he was willing to sacrifice everything to do that.

And that is what I think we are called to do as followers of Jesus in this extraordinary time we are in right now: to be faithful to God and God's purposes. We need to be continually asking how we can be the church in this "new normal": taking care of one another within our faith community, and stretching outward to love our neighbours. We need to find new ways of living out our core values of Caring, Sharing and Exploring. The good news is that we can take this journey one step at a time, asking for God's guidance every day and trusting that God will lead us, even when we're uncertain about the future and how this all will end. .

That's what I've been doing myself in this time of COVID-19. Each day I've been asking God: what do you want me to do today? Where can I best serve? What new ways of connecting and reaching out to others can I do? How can I best be a spiritual leader during this time? And each day God has led me to know what to do, what the next step is. I know that there's a long road ahead which will be difficult at times, but my task is to stay faithful, just as Jesus was on his journey to the cross, trusting in God to be with him through it all. Today as we celebrate Palm Sunday and prepare to enter Holy Week, may God grant us courage and strength to walk that journey of suffering and pain, but one that we know also ultimately leads to new life, hope and resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayer: Holy God, we give you thanks for this day: a joyful day, a day of worship and praise. We give thanks that you are with us in this journey of COVID-19, even as we face much fear and uncertainty about how it will affect each of us and how it all will end. We give thanks for Jesus, who walked his own path of suffering and pain, and through it all remained faithful to you. Help us O God, as we walk through this difficult time to be faithful to you and your call, and your people. Guide us each day, that we might be led to do what you want us to do, trusting that no matter happens, you are with us. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.