

“From Parade to Pariah” – Mt 21:1-11 & Mt 26:14-32

We just heard two texts from Matthew’s gospel: one that is used on Palm Sunday, a text describing Jesus’ triumphal if somewhat odd entrance into that headquarters of the Jewish faith, Jerusalem; and part of one that is used when the Sunday is recognized as Passion Sunday, a text that portrays the beginning of the path from the betrayal of Jesus to his death on the cross. It seems appropriate as we launch into Holy Week, with services on Maundy Thursday celebrating the Last Supper, and Good Friday remembering and honouring Jesus’ death, and then Easter Sunday as we rejoice in celebration of his resurrection, that as we begin this highest week in the Christian calendar that we take a look at the gospel accounts to see if we can discover how it all went so wrong so fast – but also beyond.

Let’s begin with the opening celebrations, as everything seemed to be going so well – the triumphant entry into Jerusalem. While each of the gospels has a slightly different slant on what happened they all agree on the central part of the story – Jesus riding in on a less-than-noble steed in fulfillment of a prophecy uttered by Zechariah. The differences in the four gospels revolve mainly around the crowd. According to Mark, it is not clear who or how many either traveled with Jesus or acclaimed him with cries of Hosanna! According to Matthew, however, great crowds followed Jesus as he entered Judea and as he made his way toward Jerusalem, and a great crowd both preceded and followed him here at the entry to the great city. Luke describes the cheering participants in the event as “the whole multitude of the disciples”, where John tells us the crowd was made up of people who were already in Jerusalem for the feast, and they came out of the city to welcome Jesus. John, incidentally, is the only one who identifies the branches being cut and strewn in the path of Jesus as being palm branches.

Matthew had a particular interest in showing how Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and his unusual arrival riding on the colt and/or a donkey here mirrors the prediction by the Prophet Zechariah (9:9), although since he was following a Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint he mentions two pack animals where the others have only one. Any approach into Jerusalem in those days was vastly different from arriving in a big city today. By comparison with today’s WestJet crew cracking jokes, the dulcet tones of the captain and the whirrs and clunks of flaps and landing gear dropping on an approach at three miles per minute, an arrival into Jerusalem in 0 A.D. was on foot, at best three miles per hour slogging the fifteen miles uphill from Jericho in the dust and the heat. What might be similar, though, is that the reaction of the city to the average pilgrim was probably about the same as the reaction of Vancouver to the arrival of another planeload of easterners.

Matthew, however, makes sure that we don’t miss that this prophecy-fulfilling arrival of Jesus caused a stir like no other. When he tells us that “the whole city was in turmoil” he uses a word that is a form of the word translated “earthquake” (the term of course reminds us of the shaking of the earth that will occur a few days later at Jesus’ death). To his early readers that word provided an entirely different picture from what usually comes to our minds about this incident. Today we understand the mechanics of earthquakes, but for people in Jerusalem in Jesus’ day, an earthquake was a complete mystery. People would run into the streets in fear, terror, apprehension. Neighbours would excitedly ask neighbours, “what’s happening?” People would frantically run across town to find out if others are ok. The population would surge into the streets, into the squares, to exchange stories, and to calm each other. That’s the kind of turmoil that Matthew means. The kind of disruption and agitation that you get when you take a stick and stir up an ant hill. The particular “ant hill” here is the mountain of the holy city of

Jerusalem, the urban center of Judea, the ancestral home of the Jews and of God, and it has been mightily stirred up. Quite an image!

Yet only a few days later, the gospel account has shifted from the bright open daylight of the Judean landscape to the flickering of oil lamps, and from welcoming “Hosannas!” to nefarious plots to get rid of the central character as we see Judas starting to make his underhanded move. What happened? How did things change so much, so quickly? What caused the mood of the thronging crowds to swing so completely from adoration to cries of “crucify him!”?

It seems that part of the answer to those questions lies in human nature, and in the fearful desire to hang onto power that is so often seen in those who hold power. Today we can see examples of people in power exacting reactionary retribution on those who would dare challenge their authority simply by turning on the television. Repressive regimes in far-away countries are reacting predictably with weapons and torture. Less repressive regimes much closer to hand are limited to smear campaigns and legal threats, but the motivation is the same. Even within our organizations – including, sadly, the church – hostile reactions can easily be triggered by the merest suggestion or hint of an attack on the power that sustains incumbents.

So I guess it should be no surprise that the very popularity of Jesus represented a significant threat to the authorities of his day. While we acknowledge Matthew’s oft-repeated emphasis that the power of God at work in Jesus was so powerful that it caused ripples in the universe around him, it is also clear that his very ministry both appeared to be and was a direct threat to the leaders around him, both religious and secular. He constantly stirred up anthills around him, challenging the complacent, the reluctant, the self-righteous to see God and the world in a new and different way. Healing on the Sabbath, eating and drinking with sinners, proclaiming salvation for non-Jews, disputing with the religious authorities, healing the lame and the blind, raising Lazarus are but some of the ways that Jesus stirred the religious pot.

And of course the controversies didn’t end with his entry into Jerusalem; indeed the disruptions increased. Turning over the tables of the money-changers, zapping the fig tree, and that wonderful head-on attack on the scribes and Pharisees, denouncing their self-serving ways. Jesus had a profound effect on all around him, shaking their core beliefs just as an earthquake shakes the very ground we live on. Time and time again we see him turn things upside-down, with his “you say, but I tell you ...” Filled with the power of God, Jesus disrupted the lives of people everywhere he went.

And the people responded with enthusiasm – at least initially. Seeing that power of God at work in him, the crowds responded, cheering him on, treating him royally with cloaks and palm branches laid to soften his path. Shouting with great excitement, “this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee!” People responded by following him, by offering him and his disciples lodging and food. People responded by hearing his message of love over law, and changed their lives to live that message.

However, not all was happiness and light. Authorities are threatened by such popular displays by the people acclaiming someone who hadn’t bought into the ‘normal’ religious and political structures. The louder the crowd roared their hosannas and approval of Jesus, the darker the cloud of official retribution grew on the horizon. People who call for change, especially change that involves the surrender of privilege, or power, or prestige, people who call for such disruptive change do so at great risk. We know that somewhere behind the scenes, overlooking the thronging, excited crowds welcoming the prophet to Jerusalem, somewhere in the back rooms plots were already being hatched on how to get rid of this trouble-maker, this disturbing

holy man. And even the crowds began to recognize that he was challenging their comfortable practices, their self-focused intentions, and their mood changed as well, and the person for whom the triumphant entry parade was held soon became a pariah.

But we also know how it turns out. Beyond the scheming, the betrayals, the political butt-covering, and the braying of the crowds we can picture the tragic results of his trial and death on the cross. But we also recall his rising again victorious over death, displaying the full power of God in him, and so we are easily drawn back into the celebrations of the cheering crowd. However, if we are drawn too quickly back to the cheering and the celebration we miss so much of the gripping tension that Jesus created with his stirring the pot, challenging people to see God and God's saving activity in a whole new way. Giving ourselves that relief allows us to slough off so easily the depth, the intensity, the passion of Jesus' challenges to the "same old, same old" of the religion of his day. In doing so we can so easily miss how Jesus disrupted the lives of people, creating animosity and resistance.

We can also miss that he still does. Disrupt the lives of people, and stir the pot, that is. Through his followers, through his body, the church, Jesus still challenges those who would listen to live a whole new and different way. He demands of us that we question who we are, what our core beliefs are, and how (or whether) we put those beliefs into practice.

Over the past fifty years or more many churches became a "comfort zone", a quiet place where Christians could retreat from the noise, the confusion, the dust and smell of the city. The church drifted into being a kind of social club. Helping the local community was replaced by the 'official' mission work of providing money so that someone could go "over there" and straighten out "those people." Blessedly, many churches have, however, caught on to a 'new' way of living – it's not really new, since it was the way the church started under the apostles, but it's new to most North American churches. This 'new' way is called the "missional" church, at the heart of which is discovering how God is at work in our own communities and seeking to understand how we can help in that work.

It is a disturbing movement, because it challenges existing comfortable ways of "doing church." It calls for doing things outside of our comfort zone, working with people we would normally not encounter, setting power structures aside that are not helpful and experimenting with new ways of serving Christ. It is disturbing and challenging, and yet it is exciting also. Most importantly, it is the very essence of the abundant life to which we are called in Christ.

So let us cry "Hosanna!" with the crowds, then let us tarry for a moment at the cross to consider what Christ has done for us and what God has offered us, and then reoriented and refreshed move forward into the resurrection life into which we have been grafted – giving thanks to God for his gift of mercy in Christ Jesus our Lord.