

### **“Holy Disturbance” – Mt 21:1-11**

Wasn't that fun? The Palm parade with the children? That's one of my favourite worship activities with them, to march around the sanctuary on Palm Sunday, re-enacting (however simply) the entry into Jerusalem by Jesus a week before his death. It's a bit of a disruption, a bit of a disturbance, but I think most of us enjoy it.

This is the year that we use the text from Matthew's gospel on Palm Sunday, describing Jesus' triumphal if somewhat odd entrance into that headquarters of the Jewish faith, Jerusalem. Each of the gospels has a slightly different slant on what happened, although they all agree on the central part of the story, of Jesus riding in on a less-than-noble steed in fulfillment of a prophecy through 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). You might have noticed that Matthew's account has two pack animals where the others have only one, so it might help to understand that Matthew is quoting the Greek translation of Zechariah 9:9 (the Septuagint) that gives the impression of two animals, a donkey and a colt. But any approach into Jerusalem in those days was vastly different from arriving in a big city today. Far from hearing the chime of the stewardess' call bell, the dulcet tones of the captian 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. Although the arrival then was more difficult than it is today (well, once you factor in trying to retrieve your baggage it might just be a toss-up!), the sense of excitement then would have been at least as great, if not greater than it is today. The travelers trudging up the hill no doubt felt a joyous anticipation as they reached the city, the heart of the nation, the center of law and commerce and learning, and most of all, the Temple, the mighty, majestic house of God. The reaction of the city to the average pilgrim was probably though about the same as the reaction of Vancouver to another planeload of tourists.

However, Matthew makes sure that we don't miss that this prophecy-fulfilling arrival of Jesus caused a stir like no other, although it's easier to miss in the English translations. When he tells us that “the whole city was in turmoil” he uses a word that is a form of the word translated “earthquake”. That provides 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. This ant hill 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!

But this is not the first time that it happened, according to Matthew, who much earlier tells us the whole city of Jerusalem was in fear when the Magi asked about the newly-born king, and Herod reacted with the 'slaughter of the innocents'. What was common about these two incidents? It was the divine presence of Jesus that caused such agitation, such turmoil. Jesus, declared by the people to be a prophet, declared by Matthew to be prophecy fulfilled, was the one that stirred the anthill of Jerusalem with his entry on a colt of a donkey.

But that wasn't the first time we see Jesus stirring the pot, though, was it? Throughout his ministry Jesus challenged 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 it didn't end with his entry into Jerusalem, 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. 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.

Not that all was happiness and light. Authorities were 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.

But we also know how it turns out. We hear the crowd shout their praise of Jesus, and we know the truth behind their praise, but we can't help being drawn forward to the tragic results of his trial and death on the cross. 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. But because we do know how the story turns out, 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. We can 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. 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.

The big question raised here is “are we listening?” to Jesus’ disruptions. I think the answer to that question here at Central is a definite “yes”, and the results are exciting, and I pray that we will not only continue to listen and to hear our Lord calling us, but that we will also continue to be open enough to the Spirit to accept the challenges Jesus puts before us.

One of the problems that the church in North America has acquired over the past fifty years or more is to stop listening for the challenges from Jesus. The church 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 began to misunderstand its mission as a vehicle to serve its own, to tend and care for its own, and as a consequence drifted into a kind of social club complete with a concierge to make sure that it stayed a “members only” club. To be sure, new members were always welcome, but only if they were very much like the existing members. Other visitors were quickly in no doubt that this club was not for them. And, of course, there was the ‘official’ mission work of providing money so that someone could go “over there” and straighten out “those people”.

The main problem with such clubs is that they eventually die out as the members die off. Fuelled by fear of oncoming irrelevance the members dig in their heels, become more determined than ever to recapture “the good old ways and the good old days”, and thus guarantee their ride into oblivion on their stodgy ... ‘donkeys’

I am delighted to announce that a significant number of 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 at the heart of what’s called the “missional” church – and since I’ve discovered in my course at VST that we’re already well into moving in that direction, you’re probably going to hear a lot more about this approach! I won’t go into the whole concept today, but will simply focus on two related aspects of a missional church, or more properly I guess, a missional congregation.

The first aspect is that the congregation recaptures the understanding that this is not ‘our’ church – that this is Christ’s church. Now I know that sounds obvious, but reflect on it a moment - there is a huge difference in perspective, and a huge difference in how the people in the congregation begin to live out their faith when we understand this is Christ’s church.

The second aspect is that in acknowledging that this is Christ’s church, not ours, we begin to listen to what Christ is calling us to do. To do that listening we need to let the Spirit in, to open our ears and hearts and minds in prayer, to study His Word in Scripture, to be open to starting new ministries as individual members feel called. Perhaps most of all we need to hear Jesus’ disturbing reminders that His Church is not called to serve itself but to serve others, to reach out and through living the faith to proclaim in word and even more so in deed the love, grace and mercy offered by God in Christ.

Disturbing? You bet! To hear and to respond to the call of Christ to serve others is an agreement to deliberately move out of our comfort zone, to make ourselves vulnerable, to take risks, to sometimes fail. But it is also, as we have already found, hugely rewarding and immensely life-giving to become an active part of the body of Christ. That started here at Central about five or six years ago, and we can still smell the sausages and pancake syrup here in the sanctuary from this morning’s Community Breakfast as a sign of listening to that disturbing call.

May we ever continue to hear, respond, grow and be part of Christ’s Holy Disturbance.