

April 9, 2017 – Holy Week Begins

Matthew 21:1-17

These days it seems like we are inundated with political news. Since his election in the United States, President Trump has managed to keep all forms of media busy on a daily basis. And if that wasn't enough, our own politicians in Ottawa and Regina have been creating controversial news of their own. Since the provincial budget was announced two and half weeks ago, politics has seeped into every aspect of our lives. It's even spilled over into our churches.

Many would argue that politics and religion shouldn't mix. Politics is the process of making decisions that apply to all members of a particular community. Those decisions affect the distribution of power and resources within a community and interrelationship(s) between communities. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics> I agree that it is not the church's place to tell you how to vote or what politicians to support. But I believe that the church does have a place in identifying some of the issues that need to be considered. Jesus had a lot to say about the just distribution of power and resources. How could we be followers of Jesus and not be politically involved in some way?

Today's scripture reading describes Jesus performing an incredibly political act. When he got on the colt of a donkey and rode into Jerusalem, Jesus was protesting the violent acts and victory marches of the ruling Roman empire. When people shouted and acclaimed him as the heir to the House of David they

were remembering a time of prosperity when Judea was ruled by a Jewish king. They were protesting a Roman system of domination that was creating great suffering and hardship for the Jewish peasants of Galilee and Judea. Jesus knew that the Roman governor and his army were also parading into the city on that same day and he was offering an alternative celebration.

The people who greeted him shouted familiar phrases from their Hebrew scriptures. They named him as their next king, their Messiah, the one anointed by God to save them. Many of them, no doubt, still hoped that Jesus would be a warrior king, like David, and that he would build an army to overtake their Roman captors, but Jesus had other plans.

Picture it – Jesus riding on the back of the colt of a donkey... his feet probably dragging on the ground. Great crowds of people (men, women and children) surrounding him, shouting hosannas, spreading their cloaks on the road, laying branches from trees along the path. The scripture tells us that, “as Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred to its depths, demanding, ‘Who is this?’” Jesus was making quite the entrance.

The traditional Palm Sunday scripture usually ends there. But you probably noticed that today’s reading went beyond Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem. The author of the gospel of Matthew tells us that the peasant parade continued right into the outer courts of the temple. So in order to tell the full story of that first Palm Sunday we need to include what happened there.

In the Court of the Gentiles, the outside court of the Temple, Jesus found many of the Jewish pilgrims who had arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. They were at the temple so they could perform the traditional animal sacrifices that they believed would make them right with God. In the outer court were the sellers who provided the birds and animals that the pilgrims would sacrifice.

When Jesus and the crowd arrived at the temple, he obviously got off his donkey and got to work. Jesus drove out the buyers and the sellers. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those selling doves. And all the while the children continued to shout, “Hosanna to the Heir of the House of David.” It must have been a pretty wild scene.

And then Jesus said, “My house is called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of thieves.” Some have argued that Jesus was upset about the fact that there was a marketplace in the holy temple. But most scholars agree that he wouldn’t have had a problem with the selling of birds and animals for sacrifice. This was part of the Jewish Passover Festival and Jesus was Jewish. He understood and would have practiced this ritual too.

What Jesus was protesting was the fact that the people in the temple were coming there to fulfill the Jewish laws, to sacrifice their animals, to worship their God thinking that this ritual would make them right with the Holy Spirit. But at the same time they were supporting their Roman oppressors, they were allowing the

poor to get poorer, the widow and her children to go hungry, the small landowners to lose their property due to unfair taxation. These so-called righteous people were doing nothing about the injustice that was rampant in their state, in first century Judea. The temple had become a sanctuary for those who robbed from the poor, a place of hiding for those who watched and did nothing while their people suffered. In Jesus words, it had become “a den of thieves.”

Borg & Crossan, *The Last Week*, page 44.

And so the obvious question is, “How would Jesus perceive us?” What would Jesus say about our presence here in this sanctuary at this Palm Sunday service? Considering all that is going on in our province, our country, our world, would he use the same words to describe this gathering?

Jesus paraded into Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey. He caused a disturbance and stopped the commerce at the temple, basically shutting it down. He performed political acts and he did this knowing that the chief priests and the teachers of the law would not be happy with his actions. The Jewish leaders were worried... worried because Jesus was undermining their authority, worried that he would get them in trouble with the Roman authorities, worried for their own livelihood. They were so afraid of Jesus that they were looking for a way to kill him.

Palm Sunday began with a loud and boisterous parade. But as it ends we are reminded of the danger that Jesus was facing. We are reminded that when we seek justice we often ruffle the feathers of those with power and authority. We are reminded of the dangers that await us when we go into the streets with Jesus.... and so Holy Week begins.