

Palm Sunday 2020

In the Covid-19 crisis images are essential to communicating public health messages. We have pictures of people washing their hands. We see short videos of celebrities washing their hands. We also see graphics showing the effect of quarantine and social distancing. If we all follow these practices, we can ‘flatten the curve’ and give the health services the space to cope.

This use of images should not surprise us as Christians. Images and symbols are the way we hand on our faith. We do physical things – we take water at Baptism and bread and wine at the Eucharist – to express spiritual realities.

Also, at significant times in the Christian calendar, we have special rituals to connect us with key parts of our tradition. Today, Palm Sunday, is example of this. On a normal Palm Sunday, we have a procession – in Nice we process round the churchyard. This is meant to help us to connect with Jesus’ Entry into Jerusalem and its impact.

The physical act of processing is meant to stimulate our imaginations so that we have a sense of connection with the original Palm Sunday.

Today, we are going to have to use our imaginations even more. I have posted photos of previous Palm Sundays on the website, which may jolt your memory. But I also hope that I can paint vivid enough pictures of that first Palm Sunday that it becomes real for you; and also that the conflict between Jesus and the authorities becomes real – what the issues were and why they led to the Crucifixion.

The first thing to realise is that Jesus was not the only person coming into Jerusalem that day. Just as Jesus came into Jerusalem from the east (the desert side), Pontius Pilate came into Jerusalem from the west (the sea side). There was nothing unusual about this. Roman governors always came to Jerusalem at festival times because the population of the city swelled from about 40,000 to over 200,000 and there was always the risk of unrest.

Pilate would have come up from Caesarea Maritima (Caesarea on the Sea), a new and splendid city enjoying the more pleasant climate of the coast, where he spent most of the year. Imagine the sight of the procession designed to impress and subdue the natives: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armour, helmets, weapons, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Think of the sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. Pilate's procession was a naked display of imperial power.

But Pilate's procession was also a display of imperial symbolism. The first Roman Emperor, Augustus, who ruled until the Jesus was in his teens, was regarded as the son of the god Apollo and given titles like 'son of God', 'lord', and 'saviour'. At his death, he was depicted as returning to live with the gods in heaven. His successors, including Tiberius, the emperor at the time of the Crucifixion, had the same titles.

Jesus' procession is a direct and deliberate counterpoint to this display of imperial power and imperial theology. It is a pre-arranged 'counter procession'. By telling his disciples to find a colt, a donkey, Jesus fulfils the prophecy of Zechariah about a king who will come not on a war-horse but a humble donkey ('humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey') and inaugurate an era of peace, when there will be no more chariots, war-horses, or battle bows ('he shall command peace to the nations', Zechariah 9.10).

Visualise the contrast between the two processions. Pilate's procession entering on the west side of the city with the swagger of imperial power – an embodiment of the glory and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession entering on the opposite eastern side of the city embodied an alternative vision, the Kingdom of God – a totally different set of values, where the poor and marginalised were liberated.

Consider also not just the processions but the significance of the city that they were entering. Almost a thousand years before, Jerusalem had been the city of David and Solomon, kings during a golden era when the twelve tribes of Israel had been united under the rule of one king; an era when there had been justice and righteousness in the land; and an era when the first Temple had been built. So, Jerusalem was associated with memories of glory. But the Jews also hoped that greatness could return. So, Jerusalem was associated not only with the memory of past glory but also the hope of future glory. And its greatest king, David, was also the model for the ruler that they hoped for, a 'son of David'.

However, from early in its history, the ideal Jerusalem had been tarnished by the behaviour of those who controlled it. The prophets repeatedly criticised the abuses of the elite – the king and aristocracy – who had amassed power, wealth and used the Temple to legitimise their position. The prophet Micah mocked them, saying: ‘...you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice? – you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones...’

This corruption of Jerusalem had reached a peak at the time of Jesus. A small elite – the High Priest, the temple authorities, and aristocracy – collaborated with the Roman occupying power to exploit everyone else economically and claim religious legitimacy for their actions – they believed that they had a God-given right to behave as they did.

In fact, the oppression and domination of the people operated at two levels. Locally, the people were under the thumb of the Temple. Above this local domination was the domination of Rome to whom the powerful in Jerusalem had to pay tribute, both in loyalty and money.

[Not that the life of the ruling elite in Jerusalem was that easy. They had to collaborate enough with Rome to keep Rome happy but they couldn’t take their collaboration too far otherwise they would anger their Jewish subjects. This is the background to the political judgement (found in John’s Gospel) of the successful high priest Caiaphas: ‘it is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed’ (Jn 11.50).]

And the whole thrust of Jesus’ teaching was completely different from the attitude of the ruling elite. He teaches his disciples: ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is **not so among you**; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.’

There is nothing dated about the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. We live in an age where there continues to be an enormous concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small elite who frequently ignore the plight of the poor and marginalised and who are indifferent to the exploitation of the planet.

We also suffer from the delusion that we can master everything – a delusion that has been laid bare by the onset of the pandemic. As Pope Francis said in his recent Urbi et Orbi address: we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. Now that we are in a stormy sea, we – [like the disciples in the story of the calming of the storm (which he took as the text for his sermon)] implore you: “Wake up, Lord!”

Pope Francis sees this time of pandemic as a ‘wake up’ time: ‘a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. [He says that] It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard {God} and to others.’

It’s a choice between two paths, which the two procession of Palm Sunday, Pilate’s and Jesus’, also symbolise. One is the path of the those who feel powerful and greedy for profit and ignore the poor and our ailing planet. The other path is *for* humility and service of others and the rule (kingdom) of God, heeding Jesus’ voice, which is like the voice of the Old Testament prophets who condemned those who exploited the people.

This choice is the more acute in the time of lockdown, of quarantine.

As Pope Francis observes, ‘We find ourselves afraid and lost.We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together we ... have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.

Just as those in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, we have a choice. Now, and when we finally emerge from quarantine, which path will we choose? The path of Pilate or the path of Jesus?