

Message for Palm Sunday - April 5, 2020

Luke 19:28-40

It was a beautiful Saturday morning in May and I was performing a wedding at the Milton Town Hall; actually it was an outdoors service in the old walled-in prison work yard. It was all so beautiful with the stone walls and flower gardens but that is not what makes this particular wedding stand out in my memory. What makes it memorable is that I had no sooner pronounced the happy couple standing in front of me husband and wife when a loud roar went up: "Yay Jesus!"

As it happened, there was a large crowd next door in Victoria Park composed of members of various Milton churches. It was the annual "March for Jesus" parade and the participants were about to parade down Main Street once the market was closed. The "March for Jesus" parades were happy celebratory occasions affirming who and what Jesus is. Indeed I often thought of them as being a modern equivalent of the first Palm Sunday. And of course we usually think of Jesus' entering into Jerusalem as being a joyous happy occasion; this is certainly reflected by much of the music we love to hear and sing on Palm Sunday.

"Hosanna, loud hosanna the little children sang;
Through pillared court and temple the lovely anthem rang;
To Jesus who had blessed them close folded to his breast,
The children sang their praises, the simplest and the best.

From Olivet they followed 'mid an exultant crowd,
The victor palm branch waving, and chanting clear and loud;
Bright angels joined the chorus beyond the cloudless sky,
'Hosanna in the highest! Glory to God on high!'"

Yes, this is how many if not most of us envision that first Palm Sunday, much like our happy joyous "March for Jesus" parades of years past. Or was it really such a joyous occasion?

Many scholars aren't so sure. They point out that Israel at that time was an occupied country and that the Roman oppressors would have tolerated little dissent; indeed they would not have been the least bit impressed by any sort of parade that proclaimed that anyone other than Caesar was a king or ruler of any kind. From their perspective Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, far from being like a modern "March for Jesus" parade, was more like a political demonstration or protest march. In these circumstances there was every prospect of a brutal crackdown. In fact despite the way we may like to envision it, nowhere do any of the gospels specifically say that any children were present that day. Did the "multitude" or "crowd" that hailed Jesus include children? Possibly, but then again maybe not; it may have been just too dangerous. Indeed it is no wonder that the watching Pharisees urged Jesus to tell his followers to quiet down. What would the Romans make of a crowd shouting and hailing Jesus as a king? We may not realize it but it took courage and faith to follow Jesus that day but Jesus' grand entry wasn't the only parade that happened at that time.

Pontius Pilate did not like Jerusalem and preferred to govern from the seaside town of Caesarea. Every year though he came to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover celebration. He did so because he knew that if there was going to be trouble with resentment over Roman rule and oppression, it was then. And when Pilate entered Jerusalem, he did not do so quietly. Accompanied by a mass of soldiers, he would have made a splash designed to shock, awe and intimidate. The message of his parade would have been unmistakable; Rome is the boss, might is right, the strong shall lord over the weak and if I can take it I will. And so we are left with two very different parades reflecting two very different attitudes or outlooks on life. There was that of Rome in all of her imperial glory and that of Jesus. One parade spoke of brutal self-centredness while the other spoke of love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness. Two very different parades and the questions are; which one do we want to be a part of? Which one are we a part of?

We are of course in the midst of an unprecedented crisis and like all others, this one too has brought out both the best and the worst in people. On the one hand, a few weeks ago we saw people panic buying and stocking up on things, not because they really needed them in such quantities at that time but rather for the future, “just in case”. We saw the same thing happening with some people amassing a half year’s supply of their prescriptions. Such behaviour was understandable but it not only displayed self-centredness, it also displayed an almost callous disregard for their neighbours and their needs. In the past week we have also witnessed people who simply will not self-isolate or stay two metres apart when asked or even ordered to do so. Once again this is a display of self-centredness and an almost callous disregard for the health and possibly even the lives of their neighbours.

And yet ... we are also seeing the best in people too. We see people keeping tabs on friends and neighbours making sure that they have enough to eat. We see people making the effort to keep the local food bank stocked as demands on it grow with so many laid off and the government cheques not yet flowing. There are those who are phoning others striving to break the isolation and the monotony of being cooped up. There are those too who are in so many different ways trying to support those who are on the “front line” such as hospital staff, first responders, truckers, store staff and all the others still doing their jobs for the sake of the rest of us. Of all the acts of kindness and sharing I have heard about though, I found this one the most touching.

It was this past Monday and an elderly man in Belleville went to the local Walmart to buy groceries. When he got to the checkout, his credit card wouldn’t work. He then tried his debit card but he couldn’t remember the PIN number. He pulled out his cell phone to call his wife at home to ask if she knew what it was. As he was doing so though, the cashier told him not to worry about it as the woman behind him in the line had just paid his \$170 bill. He repeatedly asked the woman for her name but she refused to give it as she preferred to remain anonymous.

Yes, we are living through a crisis but as I said in my message two weeks ago, while we may feel that we have little if any control over what is happening to us, we can control how we respond. Palm Sunday reminds us that there are two fundamentally different outlooks on life or, if we prefer, two very different parades going on. One is that of Jesus, putting our faith in him and trying to follow his teaching and example. The other is that symbolized by Pontius Pilate; self-centred, answerable and accountable to no one. Make no mistake about it, we and everyone else are a part of a parade; the question is which one?