

## **Message for April 10, 2022**

### **Palm Sunday**

#### **Matthew 21:12-17**

It was what we would call a first-rate tourist attraction, and the building was enormous. There was gold plating everywhere that dazzled the eyes in the bright Middle Eastern sunshine and it was even hoped that eventually the entire building would be gold plated. The construction crews had been working on the building for more than 84 years and the work was still nowhere near complete. But what building am I talking about? The Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the first Palm Sunday.

By all accounts the Temple was a wonder to behold but all of this construction work was very expensive. Not surprisingly, the Temple authorities were, to put it in modern terms, always looking for a way to make a buck. One way they did so was through the Temple Tax. Jews throughout the entire Roman Empire were expected to pay it and it added up to about two day's income per year for the average worker. This tax brought in a lot of money but not nearly enough. The authorities then decided that the tax had to be paid in one particular currency and so the money changers came into existence. There wasn't necessarily anything wrong with this other than the fact that the money changers added on a thirty-three percent commission to the transactions! This too raised a lot of money but even that wasn't enough. The Temple authorities then came up with yet another way to raise money.

Many of those who worshiped at the Temple brought a bird or animal to be sacrificed as a sin offering. These birds and animals could be bought quite cheaply in the Jerusalem markets but the Temple authorities decreed that the offerings had to be without blemish as only the perfect was good enough for God. The birds and animals then were inspected when they were brought to the Temple but, and perhaps we shouldn't be that surprised by this, virtually none of them passed inspection. As it so happened though, the Temple kept a stock on hand and they were quite happy to sell a dove or an animal to the worshiper whose offering had just been rejected. Of course the Temple added a surcharge to pay for this service and the result was that such as a dove that cost the equivalent of four dollars in the Jerusalem markets cost \$75 when purchased from the Temple.

These then were some of the ways that the Temple authorities tried to raise the money needed to not only keep the Temple operating but also to pay for the ongoing construction. It truly was quite an operation at the time of that first Palm Sunday.

After Jesus entered the city in triumph, he made his way to the Temple where he seemingly lost his temper. Jesus made himself a whip and then went on a rampage, overturning tables and sending the money boxes flying. After that he chased out the money changers and livestock sellers. “My house shall be a house of prayer” he thundered, “but you have made it into a den of thieves!” As if that wasn’t enough, Jesus then invited the blind and the lame into the Temple where he healed them. He also invited the children in who ran around playing. We perhaps may not really appreciate the significance of Jesus’ actions, but they were very symbolic. Far from being welcome and cared for, the blind and the lame weren’t even allowed to enter the Temple because they were not physically perfect. In fact it was even said that their physical imperfections offended God. And the children had no business being there either since they weren’t important; the Temple was for adults only!

What Jesus did that day was, as dramatically as possible, criticize the religious establishment. In effect he said that the authorities exploited the people and had lost sight of what their religion was all about. In the eyes of Jesus, religion was all about the love of God and others, but was this love, exploiting people and barring both the disabled and the children? Of course it wasn’t! Quite naturally though, the Temple authorities didn’t like hearing this criticism and they were beside themselves with rage. The stage was now set for Good Friday, but one thing that we have to realize is that Jesus wasn’t just trying to make a point to the authorities, he was also making a point to his own followers as well. He knew that his time remaining with them was numbered in days if not hours, and that somehow he had to get through to them what his kingdom, and ultimately his church, were to be all about. They were to be all about people with the institutions of worship serving them instead of exploiting them. And seen from this perspective, Jesus’ act of cleansing the Temple serves as both a guideline and a warning.

It is easy enough for us to condemn the Temple authorities for turning God’s house of prayer into a den of thieves, but I don’t believe that they ever set out intending to do this. Rather it happened because they got their values and

priorities mixed up. It was natural that they wanted the Temple to be a beautiful place, worthy of worshipping God in. Unfortunately though, in the end that building became more important to them than both God and the people that it was meant to serve. The authorities didn't set out to do wrong but rather they drifted into it, and this has happened so many times since with God's people.

The church has never been nor ever will be perfect; it can't and won't simply because it is made up of ordinary people like ourselves. We can think of various episodes from history for example, such as the crusades where Christians waged wars to conquer the Holy Land, and the inquisitions where people were burned at the stake for holding the wrong beliefs. More recently there has been the tragedy of the residential schools which has been in the news a lot lately because of the delegations of indigenous people to see the Pope. What we must never forget however is that while most of the residential schools were operated by the Roman Catholic Church, not all were. At one time we Presbyterians were very proud of our involvement in the residential school system; in fact one of the most notorious incidents was connected to a school run by our denomination.

Chanie, who is also known as "Charlie" Wenjack, was born on a reserve in 1954. At the age of nine he was sent to the Cecilia Jeffrey School which was located in Kenora, some 600 km or 370 miles from his home. After three years there, at the age of twelve, he decided to run away and walk the 600 km home following a rail line. Only dressed in a light jacket, he walked for thirty-six hours in sub-freezing temperatures before he collapsed and died from hunger and exposure. This happened in 1966 and in the years since Charlie, in part due to Gord Downie of The Tragically Hip who often sang and spoke about him, has become a well-known symbol for many of the residential school survivors.

There is of course no excuse for what happened to that child but what we must realize is that our denomination sincerely believed that it was doing the best thing for the children. I have never forgotten a woman who spoke at a General Assembly years ago. She had been very involved in the school system and was in tears. She had really believed at the time that they, that she, had been doing the right thing. It was only in retrospect that she wondered how she and the church could have possibly got it all so wrong.

The church can be and in fact often is, justly criticized for the gulf between what she preaches and what she does. Even so, despite her faults and

shortcomings, the church is still unique. She is because she still embodies the love of God and his presence in the world. This is why it is so crucial that the church and all of her members, including us, must strive to have the right values and priorities.

The church is not all about a building, as beautiful and as meaningful as it most certainly may be. Nor is the church all about an institution, traditions, policies and the like, as necessary or as loved as they may be. Rather the church, the kingdom of God here on earth, is all about relationships; having the right relationship with both God and with one another. Embodying the love of Christ for all of God's children, regardless of who they are or where they are, is what we are all about. And it is when we forget this that we, like those well-meaning yet so wrong Temple authorities of so long ago, lose our way.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

All glory, laud and honour be to you redeemer King, for you are the King of Israel and David's greater son. We thank you for what it is that we remember on this first day of a week that we like to call "holy", the entry of your Son into Jerusalem. We thank you too for what we remember in the days that followed; the Last Supper and the cross, all leading up to our most holy and triumphant day of all, Easter Sunday. We do not just thank you for what happened in Jerusalem so long ago but also for what it means; that no matter who we are or what we have done, you still love, forgive, and redeem us.

We pray for everyone for whom the coming week will, far from being "holy", be just another week leading up to a long weekend. We pray for all for whom next Friday will just be a day off, devoid of all spiritual meaning and significance. We pray for all who will celebrate next Sunday by such as getting together to enjoy a festive meal, not realizing what they are celebrating and why.

We pray for everyone who needs to hear the good news of the coming days. We pray for those weighed down by regret or a guilty conscience for what was and still is. We pray for those weighed down by illness, be it their own or someone else's. We pray for all who are weighed down by grief and need to hear the good news of the resurrection; that while death is an ending, it is also a beginning.

As we witness the on-going horrors in Ukraine and the senseless deaths of so many civilians, we remember the need for the cross. Contrary to what we may sometimes like to think, sin and evil are very real in our world today. We pray for all the injured and the millions who have fled their homes. May a true peace and justice come about.

As the pandemic continues and as the number of cases once again rises, we pray for the well-being of all, and especially for those whom we know and love. We pray as well for all those on the front lines of our medical system as they continue to care for those who are ill with Covid, as well as caring for all the others with their assorted needs.

As we look to next weekend, we pray for your church and her ministry to and in the world. So often your church has got things wrong and acted in ways that Christ would never approve of but even so, your church is still your Son's body here on earth. Help her, and us, to live lives of gratitude in response to what it is that we will be remembering next Friday and Sunday, your Son's death and resurrection. We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen