

April 5, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Morar Murray-Hayes



Reading: Matthew 21:1-11

The Message: Compassion, Love and the Cross

“Rejoice, rejoice, people of Zion! Shout for joy, you people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming! He comes triumphant and victorious, but humble and riding on a donkey - on a colt, the foal of a donkey. “ (Zechariah 9:9).

I read a lot of sermons this week as I searched for a message for Palm Sunday. I didn't find many that I liked.

Most identified Christians with the hoards who greeted Jesus one day and shouted crucify him five days later.

One recurring theme was often titled, “When the Cheering Stopped” and the preachers suggest that the people stopped cheering for Jesus when three things happened:

1. Jesus Began to talk more and more about commitment.

One reason why the cheering stopped is that Jesus began to talk more and more about commitment.

During the last week of Jesus' life a very interesting scene occurred, and even more significantly, it occurred in full view of the people.

A rich young ruler came enthusiastically running to Jesus.

Jesus says: Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and then come, follow me. The masses were stunned. They were troubled first for a theological reason. They had been raised to believe that God had especially blessed rich men. It bothered them to see Jesus turn away a rich man.

While Jesus spent a lot of his ministry responding to the needs of others, even if it required a miracle, now he seems to be saying,

“The time for miracles is over. The time for commitment is now.”

It is interesting to note that in all four Gospels after Jesus enters Jerusalem to the shouts of Hosanna and palm branches there is not another miracle recorded.

There are some events we might count as miracles but no miracles are done for the people. On the face of it this may not seem significant but when you consider that nearly one half of the Gospels is devoted to the last seven days of Jesus life, you then understand the significance of this.

Jesus moves from miracles to a call for commitment as the theme that runs through the teachings of his last seven days.

While there are no miracles recorded in these chapters what you will find is a persistent call to commitment to love one's neighbour as one's self, to give away what you have for another.

Maybe I'm naïve; maybe I'm just too much in love with you all to see your flaws; maybe I'm too much one of the cheering then jeering crowds to be able to see clearly, but I just don't see this lack of commitment.

I see so many folk who seem pretty consistent in their commitment to me. Through trial and tribulation, you folk keep on giving, keep on trying your best, keep on being who God made you to be.

I could mention example after example.

My daughter is an essential worker working with the most vulnerable. She has been doing that with no protection, until this week, when I decided to make her some masks. People drove kilometres to bring me the supplies I needed that weren't available online for weeks.

This week one of our members considered putting herself at significant risk in order to fill the needs of another member. Fortunately they both have our larger church, which is dedicated to help without putting any of our members at risk. But no one can question the total commitment of that member.

I celebrate all the many ways that you express your commitment.

2. Another reason preachers suggest that the cheering may have stopped was that Jesus dared to suggest that all people are worth loving.

Russell Moore is the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

He wrote an opinion piece published by the New York Times last week pointing out that Christianity teaches that every single human life is valuable, even during a pandemic.

He quotes the poet, conservationist and essayist Wendell Berry who told us years ago that the great challenge of our time would be whether we would see life as a machine or as a miracle.

Christians know that vulnerability is not a diminishment of the human experience, but is part of that experience.

Those of us in the Christian tradition believe that God breathed into us the breath of life.

As Jesus bore witness to that in his ministry, we are called to bear witness that every human life is cherished by God -- that it is not up to us to judge whether a life in long term care is less valued than any other.

3. Another reason that folk suggest the cheers of Palm Sunday turned to jeers was that Jesus began to talk more and more about a cross, about suffering as a part of human life. It's not what the crowds were thinking while waving branches and shouting 'Hosanna!' Right now we want and need to be uplifted from our situation. We don't need Gwynneth Paltrow telling us to learn a new language or write a book when it takes great mental and physical exertion to get dressed before noon.

I think a lot about my parents -- all those who lived through a war. Years of restrictions. My dad was in solitary confinement for three weeks after lying to his interrogators as he was trained to

do. He said those three weeks were the worst part of the war he experience. And he was badly injured when his ship was bombed.

He once asked me what I would do if I was in solitary confinement -- I answered, like Gwynneth Paltrow, "write a book." Not so easy, I fear. I wish I could tell him that I now realise just how glib that reply was.

Jesus embraced suffering and in doing so, focussed us on the meaning behind suffering. As the days turn into weeks, it's harder to convince oneself that the suffering of isolation has meaning. But Jesus walked through Holy Week so we can walk through this.

The Palm Sunday parade is like the final review that teachers give before the exam. A pre-test for what is to come. Jesus gives the crowds the opportunity to get it right before it really counts.

- Do they understand what his teachings and healings and miraculous feedings mean?
- That he is the Messiah, but not what they expect?

That commitment, love and suffering are not just human conditions to be tolerated, but commitment, love and suffering are the means which will bring about God's kingdom on earth.

He rides a donkey not a stallion because Jesus isn't going to conquer the oppressors like a military king by destroying the opposition, but humbly he will bring peace and justice. May that be our calling. Let us wave our commitment and love as palm branches and our suffering as a cloak laid at Jesus' feet.