

Pentecost 5 - July 5/20

O PRISONERS OF HOPE

Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm 145: 8-14; Matthew 11: 25-30

With our reading from Zechariah this morning I would guess even the least biblically literate of our listeners resonated with its familiar images:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
 Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
 Lo, your king comes to you;
 triumphant and victorious is he,
 humble and riding on a donkey.

As soon as this is proclaimed, our thoughts go immediately to Palm Sunday when “King Jesus” makes his triumphant and victorious, yet humble entry donkey ride into Jerusalem.

This text is front and center every Palm Sunday and is read in the context of the Liturgy of the Palms. But it kind of gets subsumed by all the hoopla, including the Gospel reading itself of the Triumphal entry. The creators of the lectionary have happily provided this text for a summer Sunday, far from Palm Sunday, which allows us to spend more time with Zechariah.

In this passage, Zion is called to rejoice in the knowledge that her king is on his way, the new David. That news kindles hope. This coming king is described as having three important characteristics that distinguish him from other rulers. First, he is one who rules in righteousness and justice; as such, the messianic king holds within him the hope of an oppressed people. Second, he is saved by God; in other words, he rules with God’s help and does not rely on his own strength. Third, he is gentle (or humble), not proud and boastful.

The latter characteristic of the messianic king seems to be underlined by the fact that he is riding on the foal of a donkey. A donkey is indeed a humble animal, but its real significance lies in the fact that it is associated with work, the business of life, rather than on the business of death. It is an animal used on the farm to help with the production of food and in town to carry people and goods. It is the very antithesis of the horse, at the time, an animal used for war. The colt therefore symbolizes the very acts that the messianic king is to perform. He removes the means of warfare and announces the beginning of a universal peace under his rule.

This vision of the promised messiah is rooted in the history of God's people. The king that is to come is to bring about a restoration of the house of David, and his kingdom will reach as far as that of Solomon's. He brings God's peace instead of war. Indeed, he is God's "own man," and as such God is the true ruler of the messianic kingdom.

It is in light of this that the hope expressed in the second half of our reading from Zechariah might be best understood.

I am probably dating myself, by referring to the movie, *The Spitfire Grill*, which I believe came out in 1996. The final scene is filled with the sunshine of spring. People are picnicking. There are balloons wafting in the breeze. Laughter can be heard as children run about the meadows. This final scene is the first time in this powerful film that the clouds seem to have departed, that life seems to have come to the tired old town of Gilead. It is not the kind of cheesy, emptily affected ending that neatly wraps up a story. It feels much more real, and it feels good. At any moment, it would not have surprised me in the least to see a royal figure ride into the meadow on the foal of a donkey.

It is the new Gilead, the new Jerusalem. Of course it has come at great cost. There has been no war, no battle, but there is a great loss in the death of Percy, the mysterious young woman who loved the town and its outcasts unto death. Now everything seems different, better, brighter, more hope-filled than mere hoping.

So many people know such hope and are imprisoned by it. I hope we all are. Shortly after the destruction of the twin towers in the U.S. on 9/11, an AP photographer was working the scene and trying to capture images for the nation. He tried his best, he says, to stay objective, but it was still a tragedy painfully fresh, and objectivity was simply not possible. Throughout that first week, everyone at Ground Zero was a prisoner of hope, praying that someone might be found alive. As the days passed and that hope faded, the photographer found it harder and harder to capture images of the rescue workers.

One afternoon of another cloudless day, as he walked down the sidewalk in what had once been in the shadows of the towers, he glanced down. There in a crack in the sidewalk, a dandelion poked its way into the new light. It was not anything spectacular. In fact, the image itself was quite humble. With the roar of the machines and the shouts of the rescuers only a few feet away, the photographer fell to his knees and burst into tears at the realization that life, even in such a place as this, will persist. Amid the emerging nationalistic fervor that swept the US into war, one man found the eschatological hope in the weed in the crack on the sidewalk.

It became a famous photograph.

Zechariah seems bent on giving us a vital component for our congregational mission statements. We always want to be in the process of commanding gracefully and modeling boldly for peace, for healing, and wholeness for all of God's global children. Many of us are not supporters of bumper-sticker religion, but this one works: "If you want peace, work for justice."

Our Gospel reading from Matthew is a curious one falling as it does in the week of patriotic celebration with Canada Day on July 1 and the Fourth of July in the U.S. yesterday. In this context, the curiousness arises because Jesus claims that the people, the nations, the whole generation, have come up short. While we may try to distance ourselves from this critique, too much sounds familiar to us to discount this teaching entirely. Too much rings true.

The passage begins with the children of the land whose song is never quite understood. When they played a glad song, no one danced; when the song became a dirge, no one was moved to tears. The children were no better understood than John the Baptist, no better understood than Jesus.

Jesus is not addressing the failure of individuals to respond, but of society as a whole, indeed of the entire generation. Is it different with us? Are we not too often lulled by the other songs of our culture. Not only do we miss the moments that matter; we regularly dance when we ought to mourn for a world whose burden is heavy and for a people who need rest. When we see Jesus turn away from the gathered people and lift up a prayer to God, we begin to realize how clearly his focus is centered, not on the powerful and influential, the wise and intelligent, but on the "infants, those without real power over their lives. Somehow it is those who are naive and innocent, the meek and lowly, the humble of this earth that best understand the ways of God.

Karl Barth, wise with a humble, if deep wisdom, insisted that righteousness always requires favouring (and I quote) "the threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widows, orphans and aliens"... (and he goes on) God always stands unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it." (Church Dogmatics II/1)

The Church began as a movement, not an institution, precisely among the lowly and disadvantaged and rose up against Empire and through much suffering and martyrdom won. What fails, is church as institution, as structure that can't see very far beyond its own perceived needs. The church will die, and is in fact dying,

precisely as an institution and can rise again only as a movement as it always has been at its best, serving the needs of a hurting, and even dying world. It is among the disenfranchised and the powerless that the Gospel is best understood. A number of emergent church models are now being attempted that reject the old ways of doing worship and building community and instead seek to live the faith at the margins, without the encumbrances of physical property or established power.

Zechariah gives us a powerful paradigm. To be engaged in or to create, an effective contemporary Jesus movement, a contemporary Christian *ecclesia*, is to be in the process of becoming “prisoners (and proponents) of hope.” In this life-long faith journey, we will discover that there is no such thing as a completed “prisoner of hope,” no such thing as a truly faith-full Christian human being. There are only hope-full, faith-full Christian human “becomings.” Prisoners of hope are always in process, on a winding pilgrimage, a sacred journey, a hope-full following of “the Way.” It is hard work, but productive work is the easy yoke Jesus speaks of, and it is opposite if an oppressive yoke, meaningless work. It brings life and freedom and justice and hope...AND, as Jesus promises, rest at the last.

Sister Joan Chittister, in her book *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, writes:

Hope is not a matter of waiting for things outside us to get better. It is about getting better inside...it is about allowing ourselves to believe in the future we cannot see...about trusting in God...then we can hope because we have no reason to hope. Hope is what sits by the window and waits for one more dawn, despite the fact that there isn't an ounce of proof in tonight's black, black sky that it can possibly come...Hope is the last great gift to rise out of the grave of despair,

Hope ... the last great gift to rise out of the grave of despair!

To quote Zechariah one last time, “Return your stronghold, (that is your God) you prisoners of hope; today I declare I will restore to you double.”

Thanks be to God who gives us promised rest!

Amen