

St Andrews April 2 2023

Don Harrison: "Compassion, Courage, & Confidence"

Luke 19:28-42

Here we are again, gathering together on Palm Sunday, the day we turn our attention toward Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This morning we are going to explore why we refer to that event as a "triumph" despite the seemingly tragic events to which it soon led.

Our NT text reading reminded us how Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem with great celebration. He was received as a God-sent king—God's anointed Messiah—who the crowd thought would free them from the oppression of Rome. He would re-establish Israel's greatness, and with it, shalom, the peace God had promised so consistently through his prophets down through the centuries.

And yet, just days later, others—perhaps even some from this very crowd—cried out for his crucifixion. What in the world happened? Perhaps this: When Jesus was arrested, and it appeared clear he wasn't going to live up to their expectations that he would somehow subdue their Roman oppressors, their hopes were dashed, they felt betrayed, and so turned on him and sided with the religious leaders who, because they saw Jesus as a blaspheming pretender, wanted him dead.

Of course, we know that the crowd was mistaken. God's mission to bring shalom—the peace for which they longed—hadn't been thwarted at all. Things were unfolding just as God had planned, even though that plan wasn't unfolding as they expected it would.

I've often mused over what Jesus was feeling when he mounted that donkey and rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on that fateful day. He must have been more than a little conflicted, knowing as he did, what was soon to come. Very briefly, in the Upper Room, where Jesus and his disciples gathered for their final Passover meal together—the event we commemorate this morning as we celebrate Communion—Jesus predicts his arrest and crucifixion, but, goes on to comfort his disciples by telling them it is a good thing—a planned thing.

Why a good thing? Because in short order, his crucifixion, and subsequent resurrection, would lead to his sending his Divine Spirit to them, to comfort them, empower them, and lead them to share the good news he came to bring into territory far beyond his own travels.

Having said that, we must not let Jesus' fore-knowledge of what was to come diminish in our minds the pathos of the events. It took great courage for Jesus in his humanity to enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and face what in his divinity he knew was to follow.

We know from the events in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before the crucifixion, that Jesus experienced great anguish. Do you remember how the biblical authors report Jesus sweating drops of blood?

This was more than simply a literary device used by the writers to convey the depth of Jesus' despair. Rather, it is a report of the rare clinical phenomenon (Hematohidrosis) where the capillary blood vessels rupture. These vessels feed the sweat glands causing them to exude blood under conditions of extreme physical or emotional stress. Acute fear and intense mental contemplation are the most frequent causes.

These were the very emotions experienced by Jesus as he faced the thought of his imminent death. Not just that he was dreading the physical pain he would endure, but far more punishing would be, for the first time in all eternity, separated from his Father that he experienced—a separation we deserved, but he endured—as he carried our sins upon the cross. And yet, although he anguished over it, he didn't shrink from what the Father had sent him to do.

Why? The Bible teaches in Hebrews 12:2 that it was “for of the joy set before him Jesus endured the cross.” What joy was that! It seems to me his joy rested in his knowing to what his suffering would lead.

Within the context of the evangelical stream of Jesus’ church of which I am a part, we often will tune to the joy we believe Jesus experienced because of our personal salvation. And although I do think that is true, I also know it is not all the truth there is. Jesus’ compassion stretches far beyond me, beyond us for that matter. For “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son” is how the Apostle John put it. His compassion stretches to everyone.

There is an old essay entitled “The Emotional Life of our Lord” In it the author set out to study the words the Gospel writers used to describe the emotional dispositions of Jesus. And the word most used was “compassion” which has been defined as “ the capacity for feeling sympathy.” And, Jesus’ compassion or sympathy for others was one of the most powerful shaping factors in his earthly life.

Because of it Jesus touched the untouchable, loved the unlovable, and forgave the unforgivable as they turned to him in faith for forgiveness. Jesus lived in a society full of boundaries: boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, between the righteous and sinners, between the clean and the unclean, between the rich and the poor, between men and women. Barriers which caused hurt and division.

And so, Jesus persistently traversed those culturally imposed boundaries because of his compassion for those negatively affected by them. According to Jesus, the reign of God he came to bring was not just for the insiders, the wealthy ones, or even the pious ones who loved God and lived upright lives. It was for the outsiders as well: the non-believers, the weak, the broken, the lost, the hurting, even the despised.

Do you remember the final verses of the passage we read this morning. Out of compassion, Jesus looked over the city whose occupants he knew were soon to cry out for his crucifixion, and he wept for them --because they didn’t understand the peace he came to bring, and the consequences for them that lay ahead. I’m convinced we need to pray for that kind of compassion for our own city. Which is where I want our thoughts to finally land this morning.

Like Jesus, we too live in a world and community full of boundaries: boundaries of race and ethnicity, of socio-economic status, of political loyalties, religious affiliations, or differing lifestyles. And we may find it all too easy to live out a comfortable existence within those boundaries and seldom give thought to those living outside of them. If that should be so, you may write it down as a fact that it is not what Jesus has planned for us.

Consider this, following his crucifixion, the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, and so you might imagine they had many questions for him. (We find the account in Acts. 1:6 f.) one of those questions was this : “Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel? In other words: “Is the peace you have promised coming its fullness now?” At which Jesus responded “It is not for you to know the times and dates the Father has set by his own authority. But, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

In another post-resurrection occasion, when Jesus appears to his followers he says “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, receive the Holy Spirit.” This is the moment Jesus’ disciples receive both their empowering and commissioning to carry on his work of boundary breaking, peace bringing and kingdom building that he began on earth, and will now carry on from glory through them—well, actually, through all his followers—including us.

Do you remember the passage in Ephesians that teaches how Jesus’ followers—who by God’s grace have been given new life through his Spirit—“are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

There is simply no getting around it. What's more. Jesus was confident that his followers would successfully carry out the work he has prepared for us, this great commission for which we have been empowered. Even before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when Peter first declared that Jesus was the "Christ, the Son of the loving God", Jesus declared that on that truth he would "build his church."

And he has, as down through the centuries, generation after generation of his followers, both inspired and enabled by his Spirit, have carried on after him, spreading the good news of the arrival, presence and still coming kingdom of God's peace to earth.

Now think of this. Christ's Church, in the communities in which followers of Jesus initially established them, had a two-fold life-giving rhythm—like breathing in and breathing out. Nothing has changed. It's the same today as it was yesterday. As we breathe in we gather as a family to worship, pray, study, learn, challenge, discipline, encourage and support one another. Like the tide coming in to rest.

But, then, the church breathes out. In that outward move, the Spirit of God, through the movement of his church, flows like the outgoing tide of God's presence into our homes, neighbourhoods, schools, playgrounds and workplaces--always looking for people and situations into whom, and into which, we can bring both tastes and a promise of God's peace, as well as an invitation to return here--on the incoming tide so to speak--to a this place of peace, rest, inquiry, and spiritual nurture

Our churches are meant to be places of rest, nurture: just as harbours are meant to be safe places for ships to pause and refit. But all sailors know that ships weren't built to lie in harbours: Ships were built to go to sea. And so are we, just as our Christian predecessors in this very city did before us.

Think about it. Perhaps a century and a quarter ago your church didn't exist here in Kamloops. But your spiritual ancestors had a vision to reach into this new community for Christ. I'm sure that wasn't easy. It would have taken a good measure of the three things we have been thinking about this morning—courage, compassion and confidence—to do so. But as we know, their confidence was well placed. In the fullness of time, a church was first planted, and then, over the first decades and now generations, nurtured until it became firmly rooted in the soil of our city. Your congregation has a proud history behind you, and a promising future ahead, as you continue re-visioning for the future that you're undertaking, and embrace with courage, compassion, and confidence the life giving rhythms of the Church that we have thought about today. As I see it anyway. Pray