

# Journeying through Holy Week

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

Christians are in the middle of the holiest week of the Christian year. In the words of Diana Butler Bass, “Christians will commemorate, re-enact, and celebrate the final days of Jesus’ life.”

On Palm Sunday, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. A small group of early followers acclaims him as he rides. For me, the scene always brings Jesus Christ Superstar to mind. “Hosanna, hey sanna, sanna sanna ho, sanna hey, sanna, hosanna. Hey J.C, J.C, won't you smile at me? Sanna ho, sanna hey, Superstar.”

The donkey refers to the prophet Zechariah, who proclaims this procession as a triumphal one. Zechariah 9 reads, “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off; and he shall command peace to the nations ... to the ends of the earth.”

He shall command peace to the nations. Imagine the difference it would make if Jesus’ followers throughout the ages had obeyed this command. Imagine how different the history of the world, would be.

Butler Bass continues, “I always assumed that hosanna was an acclamation, an expression of praise, a synonym for alleluia. But it isn’t. It [comes from] a Hebrew word which means ‘Please save’.”

It is hardly a triumphal procession. This is not how we normally define triumph. Instead, Jesus is enacting the reign of God, the reign of peace. He comes humbly, commanding peace, in direct opposition to the way of the Roman Empire. The way of Jesus is opposed to any empire, to any autocratic leader who wishes to impose their will on the people they lead. In this procession, he “commands peace to the nations.”

And what does that prayer to be saved mean? Butler Bass reminds us that it’s not a prayer “asking for some sort of spiritual salvation.” Those early followers were praying to be saved from the might of Pilate and the Roman armies he commanded. It is the prayer of the gospel in every age to save us from the abuse of those who seek power to enrich themselves and their cronies. It is the prayer of the poor and the oppressed to be delivered from the brutality of despots waging war.

This week continues with gathering controversy in the gospel stories as Jesus confronts power.

Then on Maundy Thursday, churches remember and re-enact a powerful moment. Jesus becomes a servant to his followers. He grabs a towel, kneels in front of his followers with a basin of water, and washes their feet. In the ancient world, this was the work a slave was required to do. It wasn’t the job of the leader, the master, the teacher.

I remember the uproar when, after his election as Pope, Francis chose to wash the feet of homeless men and women in Rome. Previous popes had washed feet on Maundy Thursday, but not the feet of the lowliest. Francis enacted the gospel when he chose to wash truly dirty feet. He went into the streets to wash the feet of the most vulnerable.

After washing their feet, Jesus begins teaching. “If I have done this for you, you also must do it for others. I have given you an example.” That teaching echoes across the centuries. Jesus commands us all to follow his example, to do what he did. It is a command, like the phrase in Zechariah: “This is my commandment: Love one another.” It’s not a suggestion. I wonder how

different the life of the church would be if we took Jesus seriously. I can't help but wonder how the history of the world would have been different if Jesus' followers obeyed this command.

On Good Friday, Christians mark the crucifixion. In some cultures, people re-enact this scene as individuals are tied to a cross. In other places, people carry the cross in a procession. Several of the churches in Cranbrook prayed together as they carried a large-ish cross through the downtown core, stopping to pray for the city and all its citizens at various locations.

Many Christians see the cross as a necessary element of God's plan for the world. For them it is the absolute heart of the gospel. They believe that this is the only way in which God could save the world. Jesus submitted to this brutalizing act in obedience to God.

I'm not sure. On its face, crucifixion was the routine way in which Rome exercised imperial power. Thousands of criminals, rebels, and insurrectionists were crucified as a way of intimidating local populations. At the time, Jesus was simply one more mostly anonymous man who died in this brutal and dehumanizing way. In this way, Rome could simply wash its hands of a political problem. They executed Jesus as they executed thousands of other insurrectionists.

The church only began to see this crucifixion as something else decades later. Only after the resurrection of Easter Sunday could Jesus' followers begin to understand that something else was going on here. But that's a different column.

Holy Week ends on Saturday. What happens on that day? Nothing. Simply nothing. Absolutely nothing. It's a day of waiting. It's a day of quiet. It's a day of entombment, a day when those first followers were wrapped in grief and pain, unsure of what this all meant. All their hopes were dashed.

Two millennia later, we celebrate Easter Sunday as a day of vindication. But at the time, it was a day of pain and waiting. It strikes me in the middle of all the noise of our world, all the distractions, all the options we face, that holy Saturday says something important to us.

I commend this week to you all as a time of reflection, a week of peace, a week of love.