

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
April 5, 2020 – Palm Sunday
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I opened this worship talking about how it is said that likely at the very same time that Jesus was entering Jerusalem, the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, was parading into Jerusalem flanked by Rome's military might into the very opposite entrance. In their book, "The Last Week..." scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan ¹ suggested that there might have been some intentionality on the part of Jesus and his friends, preparing this parade; the street drama of Jesus the "Gentle king" entering the east gate cheered on by a crowd of unremarkable peasants, while into the west gate, Pilate arrives from his beach house, all pompous with his symbols of the power and domination.

As I think about those early followers of Jesus and their day-to-day life, you know what? Right now, in isolation, we share something in common with them: they only celebrated their collective faith behind closed doors. It was an act of great bravery to gather to celebrate Jesus. Any public congregation to worship anyone but the Emperor was dangerous.

But people were ready for a Messiah to come. Some wanted Jesus to lead a glorious uprising against Rome. Others just wanted this Jesus who had inspired them with his sermons on mountains and performing miracles, well they wanted him to deliver them in whatever way. But I'm sure that few of them expected to see their saviour die. God's ways are so baffling. A Messiah arriving not just on a donkey, but also on a colt. Yes, Matthew says that he sat on "them", not just one. Sending a message indeed about God's kin-dom.

God's vision of salvation arriving in humility, a stark contrast with the dominant icon of power of that time.

So I want you imagine for a moment, that crowd shouting "Hosanna! [which] is an exclamation of praise that literally means '...help, I pray'", a phrase that we Christians commonly proclaim around now, but Jews exuberantly cry Hosanna during the Feast of Tabernacles.²

"Help me, I pray." I don't think that fear has set in yet across our country, though we watch with broken hearts as hundreds die each day from COVID-19 in Italy, Spain, U.S. I think some of us are growing accustomed to the down time. It's surreal. But we are calling relatives we didn't have time for when we were busy at school, work or in retirement.

Others of us are living at the edge of their tolerance. They are worried. They feel vulnerable. And with every release of new statistics too close to home their, your, stress level increases exponentially.

¹ *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*. Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. HarperCollins 2007.

² "Homiletical Perspective" by John Rollefson. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* - Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide

COVID-19 has revealed a truth that we like to ignore largely; that is, that we are ALL vulnerable to this virus. A pandemic larger than anything many of us have known in our lifetime has confined the entire world behind closed doors. At a very basic level, we share that experience with the first followers of Jesus, as we do not have the luxury of worshipping together physically. Here you and I are, behind closed doors, welcoming a peaceful king into the gates of our lives today, very in contrast to our modern-day kings and their empires.

My question, then, is this: What will you do today to honour that gentle king, after the palms are put away and the cheers fade? What will you offer from your home, large or small? We are all stuck at home in quarantine. Soon this Bible story will move on, a radical shift in tone. Some in the crowd who were yelling “Hosanna”, celebrating, well, some in the crowd will soon be coopted by negative influencers, joining the populist cry to crucify him. In stressful, lean, isolating times, it is tempting to pay attention to voices of fear; often fearful leaders try to offer simplistic promises to fix things when the challenges are complex ones.

Jesus in that parade into Jerusalem presented a simple message: humility, peace and love are the forces from God and they will ultimately vanquish domination systems in our world. But it isn't easy. It isn't a quick fix. It might require some sacrifice. ***So, I'm thinking one gesture at a time for me.*** How about you?

Intentionally kind actions – act on them when we feel so moved. Why delay? We are quarantined, we have lots of time, as we hear pompous politicians that remind us of arrogant Pontius Pilate showing off his military might. Do you know any modern examples of leaders like that? Here is a challenge: intentionally praying for them, and remember that they too are human. Maybe they don't look like they are vulnerable, but they are. The parade will soon be over, my friends, but let the celebration of who Jesus is, his humility and love, by actively living our lives as a reflection of our gentle king. Amen.

Holy Wisdom, speak us in a special way today. These are challenging times. Truly being thankful, not just in a “gratitude light” kind of way, but truly acknowledging our blessings around us, and connecting in a way that triggers in us generosity and a new sense of being disciples of Jesus in a movement of love and solidarity. May our welcoming Jesus give us courage to walk through Holy Week, from the cheers to Good Friday calls to crucify him. Love us, accompany us, through moments within the shadow of death to, reminding us that this too shall pass and that the nighttime of death always gives way to the dawn of your new possibility. Amen.