

“Performing power without triumphalism”, a sermon based on Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Luke 19:28-40 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on Palm Sunday 10 April 2022

This is a story full of allusions to past events and ancient stories. Nearly every sentence of Luke’s account of Jesus entering Jerusalem aims to evoke memories of the history of Israel’s struggle for freedom. I will talk about that shortly.

Of immediate relevance, it is also a story about how people enter a city, a topic that has been consuming our attention. So for us at this time, Jerusalem is Kharkiv and Mariupol and Lugansk and Donesk which Russia is entering with airstrikes and tanks, with Javelin antitank missiles and Switchblade “kamikaze” drones, with guns and bombs. This story of a figure riding a donkey is such a contrast.

This story though is also about how followers of Jesus exercise power in the public realm. And we have been seeing people try to do that. So in a way, Jerusalem is Wellington when people entered the city centre with tents and threats and demands, refusing to move. And Jerusalem is Dunedin, when farmers concerned about increasing regulation drove tractors down George Street and people who oppose mandating vaccinations set up camp in the Octagon. People trying to exercise what power they have, to conquer in Ukraine, to demand being heard in Wellington, to raise public awareness in Dunedin.

Luke’s account of how Jesus enters a city seems very relevant, frighteningly relevant. In Luke there are no palm branches, only people laying down cloaks along the road where Jesus rode the donkey. There are no crowds, only the multitude of the disciples beginning to praise God joyfully with a loud voice. There are no hosannas, only people saying “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” This is no triumphal entry. It is carefully choreographed street theatre. So let’s take as seriously as Luke the carefulness of the story-telling.

The references to the Mount of Olives are deliberate. Jesus goes *up* (v. 29) and *down* (v. 37) the Mount. At that time, the hill had served as one of the main burial grounds for the city for over 2000 years, nearly 3000 years. The parade begins among the graves of the dead, among the forbears of faith. People are reminded of Zechariah’s vision of the ultimate battle between Israel and her enemies. Zechariah 14 - Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations ... On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east... (Zech 14:2-4) Already the tension. The stakes are raised. People are reminded of the hope buried in the soil, buried on the hill on which they stand, that God would finally come and liberate them from their enemies. This at a time when Jerusalem was occupied by Rome, an empire at the height of its power, with heavily armed legions marching through the streets.

We notice something strange about the story. More than half of it focuses on the instructions given by Jesus to two disciples. Why? Because this parade is not accidental or coincidental or haphazard. This is a planned and *choreographed*. Luke wants us to recognise that what is happening is deliberate. Jesus is taking control at a crucial stage in his life.

The use of the colt evokes more memories for people. From Zechariah: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech 9:9). The promise was of an end not only to oppression for God’s people (9:8), but to *all* political violence and war. The next verse in Zechariah: “God 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” (9:10). The donkey is a symbol of non-violent resistance and of Israel’s freedom.

People lay their cloaks on the road in front of Jesus (Lk 19:36). It echoes what happened to a ruler generations ago, when Jehu was declared king. And the chant refers back as well, to Psalm 118 - Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. And the words “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” are the same words that were used by Roman poets and orators for the Roman emperor. What we have here is street theatre acting out the rule of a nonviolent messiah.

Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, go further. They argue that there were likely *two* processions into Jerusalem during Passover week. It was a volatile time. Jewish pilgrims gathered to celebrate their freedom from the past Egyptian Empire. So here were pilgrims celebrating their freedom, then being confronted by another oppressive rule, the Roman Empire. Confronting. Disturbing.

So, say Borg and Crossan, as Jesus entered the city from the *east*, a military cavalry led by the Roman governor Pilate arrived in the city from the *west*. The Jewish pilgrims would have known this because it happened whenever Rome won a battle or whenever Rome wanted to enforce its rule. A victorious general would wear regalia identifying him as kingly and near-divine, riding in a chariot through the streets with his army and the spoils of war, aimed at intimidating dissenters.

So Jesus’ “counter-demonstration,” was subversive. Pilate rode into the city on a war horse; Jesus on a borrowed donkey portraying the power of peace. Little wonder that Luke reports that some of the Pharisees try to silence the disciples, wishing to avoid a political scene (Lk 19:39). But Jesus’ response is sharp and pointed: “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out” (Lk 19:40). Its yet another reference to an historical event. The prophet Habakkuk (2:6-11), criticises the exploitive rich who try to insulate themselves from the angry masses they oppress. Habbakuk, in speaking of the uprising of the oppressed says – even the stones will cry out. Luke wants us to see how Jesus takes the side of the angry oppressed against the exploitative rich. Here is the gospel on public display, reaching deep into the hallowed stories of the past, making connections with the legacy of liberation, inspiring people with their heritage of freedom, building hope and reminding them of the power they have.

Where does real power lie and how do we express it now? It doesn't work imperially, trying to lord it over others. In the gospel, true effective power that builds conviction and deep commitment, is found in a non-violent saviour riding a donkey, siding with those who are oppressed. And because of that deep engagement, Jesus was a threat to the colonized status quo of occupied Palestine in the first century. Jesus was investing his life in a new way and he was portraying that way through carefully choreographed street theatre, noticed only by those able to see it, the crowd of disciples, which is our calling.

I was reflecting on the story alongside the many words spoken about one of New Zealand's most remarkable leaders, Moana Jackson, who died recently. It has been said that few people have had a greater impact on law and practice. Moana Jackson's beginnings were humble. He was quietly spoken. He was somewhat shy. Yet his analysis of colonialism in New Zealand was searingly truthful. The path that he laid out for our nation was challenging. His thoughtful and quiet scholarship inspired many of our leaders and lawyers and judges. It was done with determined, thoughtful, engaging and humble truthfulness. And with great hope. He thought the process of decolonisation under way in our nation was unstoppable. As I kept reflecting on Luke's account of Jesus entering Jerusalem, I thought Moana Jackson was an example of what Jesus was dramatizing, reminding us of our history, reminding of us of what cried out from the stones, courageously and quietly putting it before us until we had to face it.

Yes, here is power, power expressed in public, non-violent power for the sake of peace, with careful faithful courageous choreography. The street theatre of a donkey-riding Jesus, inviting us to follow, as individuals, as a congregation.

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