

"RIDE ON" ©

Sermon Notes for The Rev. Joyce Kelly
Supply Minister of Worship and Pastoral Care
Bloor Street United Church
PALM / PASSION SUNDAY - March 28, 2010

Readings:

Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Zechariah 9 - An Oracle.

The word of the LORD is against the land of Hadrach
and will rest upon Damascus.

For to the LORD belongs the capital of Aram,
as do all the tribes of Israel;

Hamath also, which borders on it,
Tyre and Sidon, though they are very wise.
Tyre has built itself a rampart,
and heaped up silver like dust,
and gold like the dirt of the streets.
But now, the Lord will strip it of its possessions
and hurl its wealth into the sea,
and it shall be devoured by fire.

Ashkelon shall see it and be afraid;
Gaza too, and shall writhe in anguish;
Ekron also, because its hopes are withered.
The king shall perish from Gaza;
Ashkelon shall be uninhabited;
a mongrel people shall settle in Ashdod,
and I will make an end of the pride of Philistia.
I will take away its blood from its mouth,
and its abominations from between its teeth;
it too shall be a remnant for our God;
it shall be like a clan in Judah,
and Ekron shall be like the Jebusites.
Then I will encamp at my house as a guard,
so that no one shall march to and fro;
no oppressor shall again overrun them,
for now I have seen with my own eyes.

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.

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the warhorse from Jerusalem;
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.
Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;
today I declare that I will restore to you double.
For I have bent Judah as my bow;
I have made Ephraim its arrow.
I will arouse your sons, O Zion,
against your sons, O Greece,
and wield you like a warrior's sword.

Then the LORD will appear over them,
and his arrow go forth like lightning;
the Lord GOD will sound the trumpet
and march forth in the whirlwinds of the south.
The LORD of hosts will protect them,
and they shall devour and tread down the slingers;
they shall drink their blood like wine,
and be full like a bowl,
drenched like the corners of the altar.

On that day the LORD their God will save them,
for they are the flock of his people;
for like the jewels of a crown
they shall shine on his land.
For what goodness and beauty are his!
Grain shall make the young men flourish,
and new wine the young women.

Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem!

Like every year, it's packed with people from Judea, Galilee, the whole western Mediterranean rim – drawn by Jewish Law and the tug of faith - for the central feast.

Like running water, pilgrims surge past windowless houses whose backs are turned to narrow streets, jostle through open markets as they buy special food for the feast, and trudge up to the Temple for cleansing ceremonies. At night, they go to welcoming local homes, and to little camps out on the hills, where baby cries break the dark, and fires flicker, and bearded elders argue the old story beneath the moon.

Passover - exodus from slavery in Egypt – draws Jesus and all his people to the holy place, as surely as it will our Jewish neighbours at sundown tomorrow night. Passover – exodus from all kinds of oppression – God's gift for all people – as great an irony now as then!

Always alert to the possibility of revolt, the hated Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, moves his headquarters from Caesarea on the coast, to Jerusalem. Soon to be removed from his post - for his distinctly un-Roman vicious murder and oppression of the proud and conquered Jewish people, he uses the time he has left to press hard. He orders extra guards to patrol city walls and Temple galleries, making it vitally clear who is in charge; the Roman eagle looms and leers on every side. Pilate permits the High Priest's ceremonial robes to be made available – very briefly – before he locks them up again for the rest of the year.

This is Jerusalem, the city of David - whose kingdom back in the morning days of Israel's long-gone glory stretched from Egypt to Lebanon. Jerusalem, chosen capital city of David - who proclaimed God's promise to raise up, in the final days, a son who would bring in God's reign of Justice and Compassion, that would extend to the very ends of the earth.

People by night fires talk of that promise. When will this new David come – and deliver - them? When will the hated Romans be overthrown? Maybe this year!

Among the crowd, as every year, are those who hope it will be soon - zealots hungry for violence, ready to help make it happen. Some live as guerrillas in the hills, and harass the ruling forces at every chance. Called iscarii, Iscariots (*'knife-men'* the word means), by the hundreds they slip into the city for the feast, curved knives hidden in the folds of their long robes, ready for the signal that the time, at last, has come.

This year (every pilgrim knows) Jesus of Nazareth, strong prophet from the north, is among them. His anger, people say, is like the wrath of God (it overturns tables), yet his love for little children and people at the fringes, is as warm as the sun itself. Like a magnet he draws people from their nets and from their knitting to follow him.

He challenges (and prevails) against evil that grips people, that blinds them to Hope, that twists and bends them lower than God wants anyone to be. All that is false recognizes him and falls away before his words and power. Yet always in his voice and hands is Compassion for weary folk, and healing for broken body and soul.

Soon, whispered gossip says - soon, he'll be arriving at the city gates.

But first, he pauses at a nearby village. "Go in," he tells two friends. "You will find a young donkey. It's been arranged. Someone will ask for the password. Just say, 'The Lord needs it'. The Lord needs it!

And so it happens. Jesus has friends in all places. They bring the colt to Jesus - no word about him mastering the unbroken animal. Jesus, perfectly in synch, with all God's creatures – and they with him!

Alone, he rides toward the city gates - Zechariah (9) all the way! Zechariah, who they know!

"Lo, your king comes to you;

Triumphant and victorious,

humble and riding on a donkey ...

He will cut off the chariot and warhorse ... and command peace to the nations."

Forgetting Zechariah was all about peace, crowds rush to hail Jesus King - knife handles fingered beneath long robes.

For many, like Judas Iscariot (iscarii) – a knife-man himself, it seems as if the time has come – at last.

Palm branches carpet the road. Palms are to Israel what the maple leaf is to Canada. Whenever nationalism ran high in Israel, palm branches were everywhere.

And, people throw their cloaks on the road – not Sir Walter Raleigh gallantry, but from a centuries-old act of garments thrown on the road before triumphant military hero, General Jehu, as he rode into Jerusalem to be anointed king. (II Kings 9:13)

The lone rider is surrounded – some before, some behind. “Hosanna,” they cry, which means “Save Now! Freedom Now!” “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” – straight out of Psalm 118, that this crowd knows well – that heralded the great military victor, Judas Maccabaeus, Judas the Hammer. Zechariah, General Jehu, Judas Maccabaeus – they’ve heard the stories, know them well!

And more! Hearts overflow because they are entering David’s city - despite Roman armour glinting and clanking all around. “Jesus, son of David,” a blind beggar calls.

And all around – “Blessed be the kingdom of our ancestor David that is coming - coming now. Hosanna – save now – freedom now. Hosanna in the highest!”

Gaza, West Bank, Jericho, East Jerusalem, PLO, Hamas, Hosanna – save now – freedom now. Rifles glint, palms of hope wave/then fall to dust, occupied territory, blockades, bombed buses/markets, homes one day/bulldozed rubble the next, peace accords, armour glinting/clanking, broken agreements, hit/hit back, victim/aggressor changing places generation after generation since Jesus’ parade, UN and US reprimands, Canadian Jewish Congress and differing “Peace-Now” Jewish voices, political prisoners taken/negotiated/released.

God watches it all, takes it in, loves the sinner but not the sin. God weeps, “O that you might know the ways of your peace.” (Luke 19:41-44)

The cry still rises, “Blessed be the realm of God that is coming – coming now. Hosanna – save now – freedom now. Hosanna in the highest!”

Jesus’ heart breaks for his own people, for who they are, who they could be, who they yet may be, for all his brothers and sisters with love that has no bounds of race or creed.

Riding into the city, his heart aches, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, O that you knew the things that make for peace.”

Forgetting that Jesus is all about peace, some wonder what he’ll do next – the palace – the barracks? Where will he start?

I wonder – as they watch – do they begin to wonder if they might have it wrong?

Jesus goes only to the Temple – no where else. He looks around at everything – sees it all, takes it in, lays it on his heart – sees us seeing him, not seeing him – sees all we are, and all we yet can be.

“Then,” the gospel says, “as it is already late,” without press conference or posed photo op, he leaves the city and returns to the nearby village with his friends.

At least one of them is disappointed.

I wonder – is this when he decides he must force Jesus’ hand? Five days later, with only women left to watch, the prophet from the north is dead.

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On Palm Sunday we remember all this again – not because it’s colourful and interesting, but because it’s part of our faith story, part of who we are as Christians. People of other faiths have other ways of responding to the Mysterious Life-giving Spirit in this world, but our faith family meets it and names it through the winding footprints of the people of Israel, and Jesus, the Jew from Nazareth, within whom dwelt the godness that we call Christ. We are part of the community, who, down the years, has known Jesus as a window into that surrounding creating Spirit who people call God.

We do this not just to recall the past, but so we can re-call our lives – as Christians; not just to remember, but to be re-membered, put back together again as Christ’s people, despite empire ways that still strut their brief power, still reach for us; not to open up history, but to open up ourselves to the Holy Spirit who would use us in this history that we are making this day, who can free us from ungodly forces that summon us, and bend us lower than God wants us to be.

So once again we come to this holy place for our annual festival. Once again, and still, as children join the parade of gladness and innocence, stones and bullets and secret bombs punctuate the Temple Mount. Insignia of conflict everywhere - voices of hard certainty still ringing out.

In that imposing shadow, as we tell our story again, we stand together against oppression and injustice wherever we find it. We stand with Jesus, and work for the things that belong to his peace. Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Luke 19.41

And through it all, this year as every year, comes the rider on his solitary way – only he, it seems, aware of where all this leads.

Riding, riding, he comes - into this broken city of a world. Jerusalem, Jerusalem!

Toronto Toronto painted William Kurelek –Jesus hardly noticeable on the front steps of old city hall. O that you knew the things that belong to your peace!

The global crowd presses close this Holy Week, imagining we know his name, motivated, as always, by contradictory hard opinions and brief enthusiasms.

And on he rides, shouts about his ears, past unshakeable religious certainty that shrinks God’s name to fit a flag or formulae, past resentments too old and judgments too quick, past those who think they know whose fault it is and how it’s never theirs, past pride too soon and shame too late, past little boys wrapped in shrouds of death, old people explaining from a safe distance, past those who are underfed and over-worked, overfed and underworked, past all us brief guests on this lighted planet that we’ve tainted with our greed and infected by our pride, past (and through) our best intentions – taking it all in, laying it on his heart!

Riding, riding, on he comes, through palms of celebration and shouts of allegiance, into the city of our own lives.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” he weeps - over our world – and every one of us. “Would that you knew the things that belong to your peace.” “With tears of grief” – and the heartbreaking Bach chorale surges!

The face of God we see on this Palm Sunday, and in coming days, is streaked with tears (our tears, God’s tears) for all we’ve done to our green earth on our brief visit here, and to each other. Seeing it all, God weeps, “Would that you knew the things that belong to your peace.”

Still Christ rides on, relentless on his steady path – weeping, holding, leading, riding on – not defeated, never defeated.

For all the pomp and palaces, resentment, rages, and frail loyalties, he rides on into the world’s one city where we live. Some who think they know him wave and shout his name; others who never claimed to be his friend date their letters from his birth. Jesus is a glimpse of ‘God come riding on this earth’, holding out to us the things that belong to our peace.

So come on! Travel the road to freedom!

Whatever pain you bear – your aching heart, your shattered dream, your broken body or soul, your passion/compassion for this cruel world. No matter what gloom lies ahead – let the Peace of Christ be in you.

Travel the road to freedom, “I am the Way (says Christ), I’ll take you there.” Hosanna!

Easter Morning Glory-Light is coming – and is here! Thanks be to God!