



Rev. Christ Taylor - 04.05.2020

Emptiness

Jesus came in peace. He didn't ride a magnificent war horse into Jerusalem as Alexander the Great had done some three hundred and fifty years before. He came riding a donkey, fulfilling the promise of the prophet Zechariah (9:9): "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Should 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."

A war horse intimidates. It is massive and powerful. Riding his great war horse and wearing his plumed helmet, it is said that Alexander towered some thirteen feet above the ground.

A donkey, on the other hand, is a homely, unimposing beast. Slow and stubborn, it is the work animal of the poor. There is nothing intimidating about a donkey. Riding a donkey in the midst of the great procession, Jesus is making it clear that he has come not to terrify or oppress. He has come to serve. He has come to carry our burdens. He has come to take those burdens upon himself.

He knew what lay ahead. He wasn't fooled by the crowd and by their shouts of acclamation. Three different times he had already told his followers that in Jerusalem he would be condemned by the chief priests and scribes who hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. It was a horrific end that lay just ahead of him now; the most excruciating and humiliating the Romans could devise.

But Jesus continued to move relentlessly forward. He embraces the terrible destiny that now awaits him. Six hundred years before him, the prophet Isaiah spoke of a servant whose suffering would prove redemptive:

He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected and by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted

him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:2-6).

The prophet got it exactly right. You would be hard pressed to find a better summary of exactly what Jesus was all about. The prophet knew: the one who saved would ultimately be the one who suffered, the one who served.

Some believe that the mark of real leadership is the capacity to impose one's will on a people or on an organization. Some leaders are like that; Hitler and Stalin are extreme examples. But at some point I'm sure all of us have encountered lesser versions: the boss at work who never listens; the person at the club who always has to have his or her own way. Now when there's a fire that kind of leadership can be a gift – strong, decisive – it is great when immediate action is critical. Think of Roosevelt in the days leading up to World War II.

But most of the time there isn't a fire. The majority of the time real success is measured not by the ability to impose one's will, but by the capacity to motivate, empower and to realize the extraordinary potential of others. That doesn't happen with a top-down style.

Jesus didn't come to force belief. He came to change our hearts. He came to change our lives. He had access to all the powers of creation itself, and could have imposed what he knew was best and right. But Jesus chose another way. He chose to come underneath us. He chose to offer his life as a sacrifice for all humanity.

Like Gandhi, like Martin Luther King Jr, Jesus came in peace. And like them, he left this world a different place. Like them, the power he brought to bear was of a different kind, and the one thing we know, the one thing we can claim beyond any doubt or argument, is that in all of history, no one has had the impact of this one man: a poor carpenter from a backwater province of the Roman Empire who died on a cross after just three years of ministry. "He was despised and rejected and by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised..."

How do you explain it? Clearly, there was something going on here much greater than anything we've seen before or since; a power at work altogether different from anything we usually associate with the word. "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities..."

It was our sins, our brokenness that Jesus carried with him to the cross – everything that has undermined our lives, everything that has destroyed our relationships, everything that has bound us up and diminished us and held us back. Jesus carried it all so that with his sacrifice we might be forgiven. He carried it all so that you and I might be set free; "upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed..."

It wasn't some great war-horse that Jesus came riding on into Jerusalem. It was a donkey; a symbol of peace, of service, of sacrifice. It wasn't his own greatness that Jesus sought. It was great lives for the likes of you and me.

We've all made mistakes. We've all done things that fill us even now with a sense of shame. That's the power of sin in our lives. Like tidal waters gradually eating away at concrete posts, sin ebbs and flows around everything we care most about; seeping into the cracks and crevices, chipping away at our lives piece by piece, undermining and destroying God's good creation.

It is love that sets us free; God's love, in Jesus' great gift of self. It is in turning towards Jesus that we find forgiveness. It is in the choice to believe in him and follow him that we open our lives to God's presence and power. Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. It is the great life, the Kingdom-kind-of life that Jesus came to share. Friends, believe the good news of the Gospel: in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. In Jesus we are deeply and truly loved.