

# A tale of two processions

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 20 March 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Palm Sunday C

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19: 28-40; Contemporary Reading <sup>1</sup>

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Some years on this Sunday, we tell the whole passion story. This makes sense, because not everyone is able to make it to a Good Friday service. But this year we are focusing on the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. We call it Palm Sunday, but, as I told the children, actually in the version we heard today, there are no palms in the story. Instead the crowds lay their cloaks in Jesus path. Never mind. Such details are not that important.

But, there is one significant detail in Matthew, Mark and Luke's versions of the story. In all their descriptions of the last week, there is a donkey... Traditionally the donkey has been seen as sign of Jesus's humility. One thing we know about donkeys is that they are stubborn creatures. Perhaps Jesus chose a donkey as a symbol of tenacity and resoluteness. And Jesus certainly was resolved to follow the path that took him into Jerusalem, and into the way of powers that sought to thwart his project of peace and justice.

One of the most interesting theological re-imaginings of Holy Week is found in a little book by John Dominic Crossan and the late Marcus Borg. It's called *The Last Week: A Day by Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem*.

Borg and Crossan tell the tale of two processions. Two opposing, contradictory parades. Two parades that invite us, in their contrast, to live our own lives differently in the face of threat or fear, despair or disillusionment.

In the opening pages of *The Last Week*, they speak of two processions entering Jerusalem on the spring of the year 30.

*"One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down from the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth; his message was about the reign of God, and his followers from the peasant class..."*

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<sup>1</sup> – *Blessing the Palms* by Jan Richardson – from *Circles of Grace*

*On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus' procession proclaimed the reign of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus's crucifixion."* (p. 2)

*"Imagine, Borg and Crossan ask us, imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagle mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Imagine overwhelming sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums, the swirling of dust. Imagine the eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."* (p. 3)

More traditional commentaries do not mention the possibility of the procession. And yet, it makes sense, for we know that there was a heightened visible military presence in the city on high holy days such as the Passover, in order to remind the crowds about who was really in control. It follows that these symbols and tools of 'imperial power' would have had to arrive somehow, and perhaps this was exactly how it came to be that there were two processions taking place at the same time.

Pilate on an impressively large war horse. Jesus on a small young donkey.

And so Borg and Crossan assert that Jesus' actions were intentional, that he planned this in order to contrast with what was happening on the other side of the city. More than that, by his actions, Jesus drew on the ancient memory of the people who would recall the prophecy from Zechariah, which says:

*"Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your ruler comes to you; triumphant and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of 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; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth."* (Zechariah 9:9-10, NRSV)

Jesus' procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. The contrast between the reign of Caesar and the reign of God is central to the whole Jesus.

So it seems that this colt, this young donkey was, in keeping with the prophecy, a sign and a symbol to all those who witnessed Jesus' entry to Jerusalem that God was still with them, that God's purposes were yet to be fulfilled. The prophet speaks the truth that the one riding that donkey had come to offer the world another way, another path to victory, an avenue to true peace.

And this other way? It surely flew in the face of the chosen values and methods of the powers of this world. It still does.

A couple of weeks ago, five of us from Pitt St marched in the Mardi Gras parade. It's the third time I've marched and the thought of it made me very weary in the weeks before the parade. I remembered what it would be like to gather in the church in the late afternoon, to pray and prepare with people from Uniting Network and Uniting (formerly known as Uniting Care). And then to be in Hyde Park from 5 pm to 9 pm waiting and waiting for our contingent to march. Waiting for food if you had not taken your own. Waiting in very long lines for the toilet!

I thought perhaps this might be the last time I'd do it. And yet, once we were there in the park with the mass of people, some very ordinary and some seriously flamboyant, it seemed right and good and I knew that I would do it again next year.

It seemed important, and fundamentally worthwhile, to visibly represent the message that there are LGBTIQ people who are refugees, who have fled persecution from their own countries, even from their own families, who are now being persecuted by the Australian government on Nauru, Manus Island and in detention in Australia.

One of the most moving parts of the Parade is when we pass the group of people known as the 78ers, people who were present at the first gay rights marches in Sydney in 1978. Many of them were arrested and subject to police brutality. The Sydney Morning Herald published the names and addresses of hundreds of marchers, exposing them to further abuse and in some cases to loss of employment, housing and familial relationships.

Today, the 78ers ride a bus early in the parade and then take seats of honour at a stand on Flinders Street. They responded warmly to our float with its message that LGBTIQ refugees are welcome here. I think they are heartened by participants who understand that the Mardi Gras Parade began as a gay rights protest at a time when it was illegal to live and love as a gay man, and when discrimination against gay men, lesbians and trans people was completely acceptable. The action of Uniting Network continues the spirit of protest and resistance, in our time, for the welcome of those who are excluded.

The Mardi Gras parade happens today because the 78ers were courageous and stubborn – as stubborn as a donkey. The abuse they experienced did not defeat them. Rather it made them determined to march again in 1979 and 1980 and onwards - to progress the movement for decriminalisation and LGBTI rights.

It reminds me of subversive stubbornness in the movie *Pride*, when lesbian and gay activists in the UK decided to support striking coal miners. The Sun newspaper published an article with the disparaging headline: “perverts support the pits.” Refusing to be shamed by the demeaning language, the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners group embraced it and titled their next fundraising event “the Pits and Perverts concert.”

As I move towards Holy Week, I’m wondering about what empowers us to be stubborn subversive. If Jesus were to ride into Sydney today, what would his means of transport be? Is she even now on the train, making her way to Belmore Park for the Palm Sunday rally for refugees? If we are wanting to find Jesus in Holy Week, we may find him there...

In Jesus’ time, the donkey symbolises stubbornness and determination to undermine the power structures that oppressed the weak and enriched the powerful. What signs and symbols speak to us today?

If, in fact, the choice of the donkey was subversive and meant to run counter to the 'powers of this world' at the time, what 'powers' would Jesus be working against today? With what does Jesus' peaceable entrance contrast today?

Where and how are we called to be "stubbornly courageous" in our compassion --- even to the point of risking ourselves?

The gospels tell the story of faith in the context of religious and political power. The passion is not about Jesus as a sacrifice or a substitution to pay the price for sin. The events of the last week are pointing us toward the incarnation of God’s justice which subverts the status quo of political oppression, economic exploitation, and religious legitimation.

Jesus chooses to enter a deadly situation without force or protection. He gives himself and without reservation. This is a prophetic act, a sign of God’s vulnerable love, which risks everything and promises to gain everything. This is the means by which God creates peace.

The week ends with Jesus’s execution by the powers that ruled his world.

We tell the story today and in the week ahead, in the face of the powers that rule our world. This story of a stubborn and faithful love for the world. This story in which love outlasts everything that tries to kill it. This story which invites us to love and to resist.

Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in?