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Palm Sunday – St Aidan’s – 28th March 2010

Theme: “Palm Sunday is always happening”

(adapted from a book ‘Eggs & Ashes’ – an Iona resource)

Kathy Galloway pp128-131

Introduction

As we begin Holy Week, we have the choice of readings for today either centring on the Passion or taking the path of the Palm Sunday events. I’ve always found the Palm Sunday aspect, to begin Holy Week, a great way to begin as it sets the scene positively for a disastrous week that ends in the joy of the resurrection. It also shows the fickleness of the crowd mentality that can change quickly from yelling praises to screaming threats. ‘Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’, to the ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ in simply a short space of time.

Setting

For Jesus, his ministry was a long journey that really only covered a relatively small distance by today’s travel ability. Three years it took, beginning with a time of testing; then calling companions, gathering followers, wandering in the Galilee, in a popular ministry which was primarily personal, marked by personal encounters, intertwined with teaching, then times of solitude away from the crowds, then returning to teach a bunch of misfits (who never really got it) what he was about; and finally the road to Jerusalem, into the glare of national, political, public debate and conflict for a brief moment.

Jesus came at last to the city after three years wandering the countryside, ministering to the people who flocked to hear him and to seek healing and hope. He set his face towards Jerusalem, knowing that it held great danger for him. Jerusalem was not a peaceful, prosperous city. It was a city with a history of repeated invasion and attack, in a country occupied by the mighty imperial Romans. It was a city full of rumours, threat, discontent, where the poorest suffered hugely and cried out for a change. It was a city where the pieties of the religious often seemed far removed from the suffering of the people.

Like the people of so many cities throughout history, the people of Jerusalem expected deliverance to come through military force – their own prophets had told the story of conquest often enough.

The prophet Habakkuk said in chapter 1: 6 -11

“For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own.

Dread and fearsome are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more menacing than wolves at dusk; their horses charge. Their horsemen come from far away; they fly like an eagle swift to devour. They all come for violence, with faces pushing forward; they gather captives like sand.

At kings they scoff, and of rulers they make sport. They laugh at every fortress, and heap up earth to take it. Then they sweep by like the wind; they transgress and become guilty; their own might is their god.”

But for the people of Israel/Judah there was always the promise to keep hope alive in testing times, the promise of a Messiah, a deliverer. Many of them looked for a great leader, a warrior hero, to save them, hence as the rumours of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem swept through the city, some thought that he might just be that leader. Clearly Jesus was aware of that perception by some; hence his entry to the city was no low key event. The way he came, the time and the manner of his coming, all referred back to scriptural prophecies, notably that of Zechariah. Jesus came to Jerusalem, and entered it humbly, riding on a donkey. There is little doubt that the crowds would see Jesus’ entry in the light of this prophecy. A donkey was not the customary mount for a warrior or a king. It was the mount of a non-combatant, a civilian, a merchant, perhaps even a priest. Zechariah saw the Messiah as the ‘prince of peace’ and this was the way Jesus announced himself to the city.

‘I will remove the war chariots from Israel and take the war horses from Jerusalem; the bows used in battle will be destroyed. Your king will make peace among the nations.’ – so said Zechariah.

The prince of peace indeed – but it was a hell of a confrontational way to arrive. This was a mighty challenge: to appear making the most audacious and blasphemous claim, trailing a vagabond army of followers from the north, into a holy city in an occupied territory of the then known world! It was a challenge to the Pharisees who did not want anything to upset their Roman overlords as it could threaten their worshipping rights. It was a challenge to Herod and it

was a challenge to the military who didn’t need a sniff of rebellion in a country that always seemed to be rebelling. There was also no doubt a question on the lips of the locals who didn’t know anything about this Jesus of Nazareth. This entry into Jerusalem was the most political act of Jesus’ life.

Middle

Most missed the point of this public challenge. The Pharisees were used to debate and argument. Jesus only occasionally spoke with them. He countered

their intellectualism by actually getting out amongst the people and sharing with them, teaching , healing and sharing meals with many who were regarded as unclean. This infuriated the teachers of the law. The military knew how to put down uprisings but had no strategy to deal with someone who offered no violence to anyone and discouraged it amongst his followers. Certainly passive resistance has been a huge part in movements such as led by Ghandi but not known in Jesus' time.

And the people? They had crowded the streets to welcome Jesus and particularly the poor who were the majority wanted peace which would give some hope in their desperate situation. They wanted an end to the occupation which may give them food for their stomachs and the possibility of a better life. Hence Jesus was initially welcomed as he supposedly brought the hope of new freedom. But the people didn't realise that the new freedom Jesus offered wasn't freedom from the Romans or Herod but the freedom of knowing your sins are forgiven and you are in a new relationship with your God.

When it became obvious that Jesus wasn't there to overthrow the Romans through leading a popularist insurrection the mood swings and they turn on Jesus. A crowd can be fickle – you see it at a footy match. Their team is losing badly and they'll abuse even their own team's players. Yet when they are winning, everyone is fantastic. Crowd behaviour can be quite changeable and this can happen quickly. We see this change during Holy Week.

Conclusion

What has this to do with us? Where do we fit into the entry of Jesus to Jerusalem? How is this relevant today?

A whole bunch of questions for us as we approach Easter. Questions about the depth of our faith, whether we are moved by crowd/peer

pressure and whether we really do care for the poor and rejected of our society. In this final week of Lent we are called to continue our self examination of our faith in the light of the Gospel.

Some say I ask many questions but offer few answers and that is true. However I believe that Jesus operated that way because he knew that people need to find answers for themselves and not simply be told what the answers shall be. It is only when we experience answers for ourselves that we feel that we are on the road with Jesus and not simply some spectator waving a palm branch to some unknown person as they pass by.

Prayer

**–
O Christ, you entered the city as a poor man, not in style but simply, yet you caused uproar and questions everywhere; you drew the expectations of a hungry crowd, and brought buried conflicts to the light. May we, who are**

sometimes swayed by the crowd's approval, and who often avoid conflict for fear of its cost to us, hold fast to the gospel of peace and justice and follow faithfully in your way of compassion and solidarity with those who are poor and excluded, wherever it may lead us.

Amen

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