

13 April 2025 Palm Sunday

Rev Wayne Toleafoa

OPEN TO ME THE GATES OF JUSTICE

Readings: Psalm 118; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 19:28-40

It's the start of Holy Week again. Holy Week is called Passion Week because it commemorates the intense suffering, sacrifice, and love that Jesus demonstrated in the final days leading up to His crucifixion and resurrection.

Today, is the first day of Holy Week when we remember Jesus' fateful ride into Jerusalem.

In Luke's version of Palm Sunday, the ride began at a path near the side of the Mount of Olives.

The distance between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem is approximately 2.8 kms or a leisurely 30-40 minute walk, or donkey ride.

Luke doesn't mention the gates of Jerusalem, but we can assume from the other three gospel stories of Palm Sunday, that this was the same ride that took Jesus through the gates of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem had seen many conquerors pass through the gates in its checkered history. Before Jesus' time, Jerusalem had been captured and ruled by various empires including the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and Romans.

Alexander the Great, rode through the famous gates three hundred years before in 332 BC during his campaign against the Persian Empire.

In 63 BC the Roman General Pompey, entered Jerusalem, marking the beginning of Roman rule over the city.

In Jesus' day, the Roman rule was well-established in Jerusalem. There was an official residence in the centre of the city, for the Roman Governors (or Prefects of Judea).

Pontius Pilate, as we know, was Governor/Prefect at the time of Jesus. Historians tell us that Pilate did not like living in Jerusalem. He saw the Jews as troublesome, so he spent most of his time at his seaside residence at Caesarea, 122 kms from Jerusalem.

According to John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg (in their book, 'The Last Week', 2007), Pontius Pilate left his seaside residence once a year and made a special journey to Jerusalem, just before the annual Jewish Passover Festivals.

During the Passover Festival the Jewish pilgrims swelled the usual population dramatically from 25,000 to 180,000. Some scholars claim that the population swelled

to 3 million – which other scholars consider an exaggeration. Whatever the numbers – there was a huge Jewish presence in Jerusalem during the Passover celebration.

Just before the Passover Festival, Pontius Pilate would strategically stage a huge military parade through the streets of Jerusalem – an awesome show of Roman military might - and a reminder to any would-be rebels, or zealots, that 'Rome was in charge!' and that Rome would not tolerate rebellions!

Contrasting with this show of Roman might, we have the parade led by Jesus, which the gospels tell us about.

Jesus' parade would have been seen as a parody of Pilate's parade.

Instead of riding a war horse - as Pilate did, the Rabbi Jesus rode a borrowed donkey.

Instead of being followed by a huge company of soldiers in armour and drums beating, Jesus was cheered on by his disciples and a lot of curious onlookers.

Instead of the regimental flags of the Roman Garrison, children waved palm leaves.

Others threw their cloaks on the ground, before the hooves of the nervous donkey.

Others called out 'Hosana!' meaning 'save us'.

In Luke's account, the crowd cried out:

*'Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!'*

The prophetic welcome which echoed Psalm 118 vs 26:

²⁶ *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD."*

The same Psalm (118), painted the picture of a conqueror riding through the gates of a city, only, he is a spiritual conqueror who calls out:

¹⁹ *Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.*

²⁰ *This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.*

Jesus' disciples, and many of his followers no doubt, saw Jesus' ride into Jerusalem as a fulfilment of Psalm 118.

Jesus himself seems to have believed it was.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus to stop his disciples from calling out the prophetic welcome, Jesus replied that,

‘even if they did stop, the stones themselves would cry out’.

Such was Jesus’ belief in the power of the prophecy in Psalm 118.

Other verses of Psalm 118 fitted so well with Jesus’ march into Jerusalem:

Zechariah 9:9, confirmed the prophecy in even more detail:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

So, they waved their palm branches and welcomed Jesus into the Holy City.

The Roman authorities, knowing nothing or little about Jewish prophecies were not concerned at all by a peace-loving Jewish Rabbi riding a donkey into Jerusalem.

Soldiers and Roman spies looking on, might even have seen Jesus’ parade as some kind of comedy.

John Dominic Crossan and the late Marcus Borg tell us the story of the two parades (Pontius Pilate’s and Jesus’ parade) because the parades represent two very different world-views and two very different perspectives on human destiny.

One world view says that ‘might is right’ and that power over others is to be desired. It’s a defensive world view that says, ‘get them before they get us’. A military, or mob worldview, that favours the strong, and favours the lowest common denominators in our human nature.

Common denominators like hatred, cruelty, greed and the desire to dominate and suppress others.

The other world view is the antithesis of the first. A world view that respects the image of God in each person. A worldview which favours the best features in our human nature like love, kindness, respect, gentleness, sharing of power & resources, and the quest for justice and peace, for all people.

Our second reading from St Paul’s Letter to the church in Philippi also speaks of Jesus’ innate humility:

And being found in human form,

⁸ *he humbled himself*

*and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

Paul urges all Christians to be of the same mind as Christ – to be humble as Christ was humble.

We don't have to look very far to see the two parades in today's world: the two worldviews that compete for our loyalty, or our conformity.

I won't mention any names, (I don't want him coming after me in little 'ol Havelock North) but the American President seems to be leading a parade of his own, forcing the rest of the world to conform to his wishes. He is penalizing those who do not comply with his will. Something we have not seen in other American Presidents.

The many nations who once relied on American generosity (including us), can no longer count on it.

I wonder how the tariffs will affect small nations like us and like American Samoa where my mother came from. An Island protectorate that relies heavily on grants from America.

During Lent, and in fact every day, we have to ask ourselves:

'Which Parade do I belong to ?'

That of the Pontius Pilates of this world - who open the gates to fear and oppression?

Or (do I/ we belong to) the parade of Jesus Christ – who opens the gates to peace, justice and freedom?

As we journey with Jesus through Holy Week, we will be challenged again and again to ask the searching questions, 'Where and who am I in the drama of Jesus' so-called Passion?

Am I on the side of the those who crucified Christ or am I/will I be faithful to the end.

THE DONKEY BY G.K.CHESTERTON

When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely, I was born.

With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody

On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

PRAYER

Humble and riding on a donkey,
we greet you;
Acclaimed by crowds and carolled by children,
we cheer you;
moving from the peace of the countryside to the corridors of power,
we salute you: Christ our Lord.
You are giving the beast of burden
a new dignity;
you are giving majesty
a new face;
you are giving those who long for redemption
a new song to sing.
With them, with heart and voice, we shout:
Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

—*from Book of Common Order, Church of Scotland, 1994.*