

March 24, 2024

Palm Sunday

**Meditation:** “The Original Reformer”

He knew the showdown was coming, and soon. The trip to Jerusalem was a trip to a final confrontation. He was deeply concerned about the outcome, for it was literally about life and death, and not just for him, but for his disciples, his family, his friends, his people, for everyone. The constant concern had weighed heavily upon him, and so he had especially enjoyed dinner with his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus last night. It had been a welcome reprieve. And now, now he was atop a donkey, riding the last couple of miles to Jerusalem.

The crowds were giving him a hero's welcome – strowing their cloaks on the road, waving palm branches, shouting and cheering. Yet even their cheers betrayed their fears. Hosanna – save us. Save us from Imperial Rome. Save us from the extensive, complex and rigid rules of the religious leaders. Save us from abject poverty. Save us from injustice. Save us from the made-up systems of men that hold us down and destroy our hopes and dreams of a life of fairness and abundance for all. Save us from all of it. Hosanna – save us.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> C, the Roman Catholic church was engaged in a building spree across Europe. Probably the best known example of the projects from that time is St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. To fund the building spree, the church was selling indulgences. They were sort of like “get out of purgatory early” cards. The more indulgences one purchased, the less time one would have to spend in purgatory working out one's unconfessed sins before moving on to, hopefully, heaven. Martin Luther believed that we are saved by faith in the grace of God, and not by works or the purchase of indulgences. He protested the teaching of the church. Along with many others, like Philip Melancthon, Huldrych Zwingli, Jean Cauvin (better known as John Calvin), Martin Bucer, William Tyndale, John Knox, Meno Simons (whose followers we know as Menonites), Thomas Cranmer, John Wycliffe, and literally dozens of others, initiated what is known as the Reformation. They hoped to reform the teachings and practices of the Catholic church. What happened was that they created the Protestant church. The Catholic church would not reform.

The crowds were one thing. They placed all their hopes in him. But the religious leaders and the Romans were an entirely different story. To them he was little more than an annoying gnat to be crushed between your thumb and forefinger. He had come to challenge the status quo that kept them in their positions of power and authority. He had come to challenge not only religious rules and customs and practice, but the deeply ingrained ways in which people saw the world, their world. He had also come to challenge the Imperial order of the world, which in that time was the Roman Imperial order. He had come to challenge everything – Judaism, politics, the economy. He hoped and prayed that the leaders would be open to seeing things from a fresh perspective and, upon seeing the injustices of the systems of the day, be open to changing the way things were; and he feared they would feel threatened and would kill the messenger – but he had to at least try.

Just as it was not Luther's intent to start a new church, but to reform the Catholic church, I believe that it was not Jesus' intent to start a new religion, but to reform Judaism. Jesus was, amongst other things, a prophet. A prophet, in biblical terms, is not someone who foretells the future – who predicts who is going to win the next provincial or federal election, or which six numbers will make you wealthy next week. Biblically speaking, a prophet is someone who tells forth what is rotten with the world in their day. So, to say that Jesus was a prophet is really just another way of saying that Jesus, rather than Luther, was the original reformer – for he was calling for the reformation of all that was wrong with the political, economic and religious systems of his time.

The church today, especially the mainline denominations, is in crisis. Our members are aging, our congregations are shrinking, our finances are dwindling, our buildings are aging and require expensive maintenance, repairs and renovations, our volunteer base is dwindling. I was talking with a member of the congregation this week about what it is that the church needs to do to continue for another generation. While we may not have agreed on the 'what', we both agreed that the church as we know it needs to reform. It has been said that the definition of insanity is continuing to try the same thing over and

over again while expecting a different outcome. The church needs to change. What that change looks like, well, God only knows.

And that is the point of what Jesus was trying to do two millennia ago. He was trying to get people to do things a different way. He was trying to get people to discern God's will for humanity, rather than pursuing human desires. He was trying to reform our perspectives and our systems – religious, economic, and political.

Jerusalem was the center of the Jewish theocracy. It was in Jerusalem that the prophets of Israel were condemned to death and killed. As much as he appreciated the cheers of the crowd that day, he knew full well that the religious and political leaders would not be happy to see him. They would not be likely to receive his call for reforms. Yet the cheers from the crowd were the very reason that he must put everything on the line. They were the ones who would continue to suffer under the status quo, or who would benefit from the elimination of the systemic injustices of the time. Filled with overwhelming courage and determination for the people and filled with an overwhelming sense of dread, it's little wonder he needed to ride a donkey into Jerusalem. I can only imagine that it would have been all but impossible to put one foot in front of another to walk into Jerusalem that day.

Ride on, King Jesus, ride on. Ride on, straight into our hearts. Grant us God's vision for the world in our present time. Grant us your imagination, courage and determination to work to make that vision a reality. Ride on, for we need you now more than ever.