

**Sermon**

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> April, 2011

Lessons      Isaiah 50: 4 – 9a      Philippians 2: 5 – 11      St Matthew 21: 1 – 11

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Almighty and Everlasting God, who of Your tender love to humanity, sent Your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the Cross, that all humanity should follow the example of His great humility; mercifully grant that we may both follow the example of His patience, and also be made partakers of His Resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**And they threw their own clothes on the colt, and they set Jesus on him. And as He went, many spread their clothes on the road. Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, saying, ‘Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!’ Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!’**

*St Luke 19: 35 – 38*

One of the living saints of our day is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He once said, ‘Those who say that politics and religion should not mix do not read the same Bible as I do.’ Speaking of apartheid, Tutu said that black people were often perplexed that many of those who treated them so abominably were not heathen but ‘claimed to be fellow Christians who read the same Bible’<sup>1</sup> as they did.

Tutu said:

The Bible they and we both read is quite categorical – what endows human beings, every single human being without exception, with infinite worth is not this or that biological or any other external attribute. No, it is the fact that each one of us has been created in the image of God. This is something intrinsic. It comes as it were with the package. It means that each one of us is a God-carrier, God’s viceroy, God’s representative. This is why treating anybody as if they were less than this is veritably blasphemous. It is like spitting in the face of God.....The Bible turned out to be the most subversive book imaginable in a situation of injustice

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Tutu *No Future without Forgiveness* 11

and oppression.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking here in Edinburgh in 2009, Tutu repeated that claim. To the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, he said:

Thus says the LORD, ‘We are family. I, if I be lifted up, will draw not some, will draw all, incredibly, revolutionary, radical, radical, radical assertion, draw all, all into one embrace and not let us go. In this family, there are no outsiders; all are insiders: rich, poor, lame, blind, clever, not so clever, white, black, red, yellow, Palestinian, Israeli, Al Qaeda, Bin Laden, George Bush, all in this embrace, all, all, all, all, all, all...lesbian, gay, so-called straight, all. We are family. We are sisters and brothers.

It is because we are made in the image of God, creatures capable of the most immense love and compassion, of wonder and comprehension, that religion has a claim on the world of politics, power and justice.

During the Second World War, many German Christians, together with others, fought in different ways against Nazism. “One of Hitler’s most trusted intelligence officers, Colonel Alexis Baron von Roenne, his Christian conscience outraged by Nazi brutality, falsified the battle order on the Western Front on the eve of D-Day. He went to his execution declaring, ‘I shall be going home to our Lord in complete calm and in the certainty of salvation.’” Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg translated his faith into direct action against Hitler. Stauffenberg was the author of the plot to assassinate Hitler in July

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

1944. A third German Christian, Helmut von Moltke, was an officer in German military intelligence. He spread the word about the appalling atrocities carried out by the Nazis; he loudly and publicly insisted that Germany abide by the Geneva Convention and, in light of the mass murders, he asked of the German soldiers who had taken part: ‘How can anyone know these things and still walk around free?’ Moltke was arrested by the Gestapo and, after a year in prison, was hanged. Moltke had spent much of his time in prison in philosophical contemplation. He believed that the moral and intellectual rebellion against Hitler was the greatest threat. He wrote, ‘What the Third Reich is so terrified of is ultimately a private individual who has discussed the practical, ethical demands of Christianity...’ In South Africa, under apartheid, we had, on the one side, the might of the White South African government and, on the other, Archbishop Tutu quoting from the Bible, that subversive book. In Germany, under Nazism, we had, on one side, the grotesque might and ideology of Hitler and, on the other, many Christians in response to their faith living out an altogether different set of values.

Palm Sunday is about the mix of politics and religion. It cannot be read any other way. Two thousand years ago Jesus rode into Jerusalem on colt that had never been ridden. The disciples brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it. Jesus sat on the colt. Many people spread their cloaks on the road while others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Those

who went ahead and those who followed shouted, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt and he makes his way to the temple. Though there is some difference in timing, all the gospels record the cleansing of the temple. At the time of Passover, Jesus journeys to Jerusalem in order to visit the temple. Once there, he drives out those who bought and sold in the temple, overturning tables and scattering the seats of those who sold doves. Jesus said, ‘Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations?’ but you have made it a den of thieves.’

There are two key pieces of information which we need in order to understand what is happening in this dramatic, prophetic gesture by Jesus. The first concerns the temple itself. For a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, the temple was the sacred centre of the Jewish world. It was the ‘navel of the earth’ connecting this world to its source in God and here, and only here, was God’s dwelling-place. The Jews understood that God was everywhere: Heaven and the highest heaven could not contain God and God’s glory filled the earth but God was especially present in the temple. ‘To be in the temple was to be in God’s presence.’ The Temple mediated God’s presence and God’s forgiveness. ‘To stand in the temple, purified and forgiven, was to stand in the presence of God.’ It was a centre of devotion and a destination of pilgrimage. The psalmist wrote, ‘I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’ Though the temple was destroyed in the sixth century BC, it was

rebuilt when the exiles returned from Babylon. During the first twenty years of Jesus' life, Herod remodelled the temple from the modest postexilic temple into a spacious and elegant building with new courts and colonnades. There was a sumptuous use of marble and gold. What is most important to remember is that to be in the temple was to be in God's presence. The temple mediated God's presence and God's forgiveness.

In the decades before Jesus' birth, Rome ruled that region by using aristocratic families. Rome used the richest landowners to manage economic resources and the peasant people. The aristocratic families collected and paid the taxes to Rome and through economic and political oppression they kept the people from causing trouble. That system broke down and Rome turned to the temple, to the High Priest, the priestly families and their connection to legal experts, record-keepers and administrators, to keep the peasants in order. To economic and political oppression, the High Priest brought religious oppression. In short, the High Priest told the people that God had ordained life to be this way. So, the first important piece of information which we need in order to understand Palm Sunday, the procession of Jesus into Jerusalem, is the fact that the temple, while being God's dwelling-place on earth, His mercy seat, was also the instrument of political, economic and religious oppression of the peasant poor by the rich. If you were a landowner, if you controlled the means of production, the food supply, the rights of your workers, if you could call in their

credit at anytime, you had their lives in your hands. And the High Priest said, ‘God has ordained life to be this way.’ Despite the fact that Jewish Law forbids the priest to own land, they became wealthy landowners.

The second piece of information which we need to understand the significance of the dramatic, prophetic gesture of Jesus riding on the colt is that there were not one but two processions entering Jerusalem on that day. This dramatic, prophetic gesture by Jesus was carefully planned. The gospel records tell us that. He had pre-arranged to have a colt ready and sent his disciples to collect it. Jesus entered the city from the east, from Galilee. He was accompanied by his disciples and many followers, by country folk, by peasants. 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.

One commentator writes:

Imagine the imperial procession’s arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust.<sup>3</sup>

Pontius Pilate represented the Emperor. He had come to Jerusalem at the time of Passover to reinforce the garrison there. Too many people gathered for the Passover for Rome not to take precautionary measures. Since the days of Augustus, the Emperor was believed to be divine: the son of God, the Lord and

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan *The Last Week* p3

Saviour. He brought peace on earth. Augustus had been fathered by the god Apollo and when he dies he ascended into heaven to take his permanent seat among the gods. The day on which the Roman Governor processed from the west into Jerusalem displaying the might and theology of Rome Jesus rode into Jerusalem from the east on a colt. Jesus entered the city as the son of David, as Yahweh's Messiah: here the justice of God's Kingdom was on display.

This is religion and politics together. The Palm Sunday procession is not for the amusement of children. It is direct political action rising from the deeply held religious view that every human being is made in the image of God and that neither the High Priest nor Pontius Pilate has the right to dehumanise a single child of God.

Let me close with a story told by Michael O'Laughlin of his friend, the Dutch Priest, Henri Nouwen. Nouwen was working in the L'Arche Dayspring centre in Toronto. Henri was working with people with learning difficulties.

Michael and his wife were visiting with their two five-year old twin boys. On the day Michael's family were due to leave, Henri got up early to go to the sanctuary to prepare for the service. It was Palm Sunday. The twin boys were asleep but had heard Henri moving around the house. Believing the adults to be leaving them at home, they appeared in their pyjamas in tears. With Michael and his wife, Henri took the boys, still in their pyjamas, over to the

sanctuary. The congregation of the L'Arche community gathered. The lessons for Palm Sunday were read. During his sermon, one of the boys shouted out, 'Why didn't Jesus ride a horse?' Henri paused and, with the boys, pondered why this might be. The three of them decided it was because horses were for rich people and Jesus was only a poor man, and so riding a donkey was the right thing for him to do. Michael O'Laughlin wrote:

Later, when it came to the time for the presentation of the [elements, the Bread and Wine], Henri called the boys to his side. Under his supervision he proudly poured the wine into tall glass goblets. Then they watched Henri's consecration with rapt attention. We all did. For that moment, the world stood still. The low altar was heaped with palm fronds, the candles flickered, the handicapped shifted and moaned in the half darkness, and we able-bodied adults smiled and bowed our heads as we faced the priest flanked by two little boys in sleeper pyjamas. Jesus was a poor man and had been a friend to little people like these – and broken people like us. Hosanna in the highest.<sup>4</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael O'Laughlin *God's Beloved: A spiritual biography of Henri Nouwen* 116