

## WALKING DIFFERENTLY

A Sermon for Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018

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During university I knew an enthusiastic Christian named Francois who with another friend needed a car. Being a biblical literalist, he took up the words of Mark's Gospel, in particular today's story about the claiming of the colt for Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He especially liked the words "the Lord needs it . . ." With faith and confidence in equal measure he went into a car dealership, found a suitable vehicle and an enthusiastic salesperson. He told the sales person what he needed and then added "the Lord needs it;" to which the salesperson replied, "well the Lord can pay for it." The transaction died at that point.

Over half of today's passage of scripture is taken up with preparation for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The way is paved with opportunity and certainty. A plan is unfolding, of a special entry into a Holy City, the place of prophets, priests, temples and kings. It is an unusual road for a typical pilgrim. In Mark's eyes however, it is God's unique way to enter his own city.

But there's more in Mark's highly stylized story, which in one sense sounds like a Jerusalem tour guide. There is a carefully

assembled script which peppers the story with ample historical references.

Arriving at the suburb of Bethany (11:1), Jesus prepares to enter the Holy City not as a reverent pilgrim demonstrating allegiance to the Temple, but as a subversive prophet. He marches into the City accompanied by an army of peasants (11:7f), whose rapturous cries escalate the acclaim of Bartimaeus (10:47f) into a full-blown revolutionary chant: "Blessed be the Kingdom of our Father David" (11:9f).

Remember, at face value, this is just a guy walking into Jerusalem for an annual temple visit. But that's not all as we shall see. Images from the parade call to mind several biblical precedents: the colt signifying triumphant Judah (Gen 49:11); the return of the Ark to Israel (I Sam 6:7ff) and a royal processional hymn (Ps 118:25f). And the fact that the parade began "near the Mount of Olives" (11:1) would have brought to mind the final apocalyptic battle between Israel and her enemies spoken of by Zechariah (14:1-5). The story recalls the victorious military procession of Simon Maccabaeus, the great guerilla general who liberated Palestine from (Greek) rule some two centuries before. According to I Maccabees 13:51 Simon entered Jerusalem "with praise and palm branches...and with hymns and songs."

While most of these references seem obscure to us they were quite familiar to Mark's readers. In the street language of our day, Jesus was about to *kick butt* in the same way as with his predecessors. Except didn't use physical violence. He will however disturb the peace . . . and then some.

Tomorrow we will commence a public reading of Mark's Gospel. We will hear again how Jesus' long march to Jerusalem takes us readers from the margins of Palestinian society (the Jordan wilderness and Capernaum in Mk 1) to its very center, the Jerusalem temple. It's a long walk, as with Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, which requires incredible dedication, resilience and constant faith.

It's a non-violent walk, not an expected transit for many in Jesus' day and today. If theologian Ched Myers is right, Mark is consciously re-organizing the military symbolism of this parade around a different Zecharian image which is expressly anti-military. He simply will not fight fire with fire. He will not strike back at those who mock him, resist him, taunt him, ignore him. he simply says, again and again, "I am here; You are loved; Follow me."

Most of us prize the stories of Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King Jr. but can we live as they have lived. Such resistance informs and animates many in our own day, as those who raise concerns around gun violence in the United States, and those

concerned about pipelines here in BC and throughout Canada. In places where conversations are difficult and challenging, protest emerges: It's inevitable. But what does such protest look like?

At a gathering I attended on Friday we asked each other "when was the first time we took to the streets over an issue?" For me it involved supporting protesters appearing in court around logging old growth forests in 1992. As I tried to explain in my recent Lenten lecture, I have for a long time been drawn to critical stances and very particular journeys, not only pertaining to environmental issues, but most recently on matters of disability rights and treatment. Such protests are not always comfortable or predictable, but for me, they are necessary. For me, it is indeed *a calling*.

Likewise Jesus, who could have entered Jerusalem quietly and unobtrusively, but *could* not and *did* not. Many would counsel, "bide your time Jesus and *wait* for an opportunity." Others simply say, "let's *create* an opportunity." Christ's witness and presence in the social and ecological controversies of our day is real and necessary. And such conversation must occur at least partially in public space.

Many of us I know enjoy the writing of Jan Richardson who today writes:

It can be challenging enough to walk with intention into a future that is unknown. But to move with purpose toward a destination that is known, and fearsome? That is quite a different path, one that requires grace and courage we cannot conjure on our own.

Such a path offers a curious freedom, too, because it invites us to enter our future not as victims, helpless before our fate, but with intention and discernment, knowing that the path we choose—any path we choose—will hold its occasions of dying and rising. And if we can meet those occasions with courage and grace, then the perils of the chosen path begin to lose their power over us.

May courage and grace together, find us and bless us all.