

Luke 19:29-44

The Narrative Lectionary provides a longer reading than our regular Palm Sunday one. We usually finish on Jesus saying: 'I tell you that if they keep quiet, the stones themselves will start shouting.' It's usually a joyous occasion, lots of palm branches waving (except that in today's reading we have no palm branches at all, just people's clothing being spread in front of Jesus) and general merriment.

But reading just another couple of verses reveals that Jesus' mood wasn't so jolly. He weeps over Jerusalem saying: 'If you only knew today what is needed for peace!' We weep as Jerusalem still doesn't know what's needed for peace. We weep as Aleppo doesn't know what's needed for peace. We weep as Damascus lies in ruins as it didn't know what was needed for peace.

We often say 'if only these stones could speak'. We say it when we're curious about a croft, a church or another building with a story – we want to know what those stones witnessed in their lifetime, who lived or worked there, what their fate was, what became of their descendants.

When we see pictures from Aleppo, Palestine and other places destroyed by war, those words of Jesus about stones crying out take on a deeper meaning. They cry injustice, war and a lot of suffering of many.

When we read Luke's account of what became known as Palm Sunday, we need to take all this heaviness and suffering into account. The suffering of Jesus is all the greater as Good Friday with the pain of the cross is coming shortly after the joy of the crowd of disciples.

This suffering is implied as, in the words of David Ewart in his Holy Textures commentary, 'what the authors of the Bible take for granted and fail to mention is that while Jesus is parading in on a colt through one of the back gates, on the other side of the city Pilate is parading in on a war horse accompanied by a squadron or two of battle hardened Roman soldiers. You can bet that he too is being acclaimed by a crowd. There'd be hell to pay if he wasn't.'¹

Prince of Peace on a donkey and Pilate on a war horse. No comparison between them, donkey no match for the war horse. And yet Jesus chose the way of nonviolent resistance – because that's what it was – to demonstrate the way of the Kingdom. What happened to the religion of the followers of the Prince of Peace? How did we ever get to where we are now?

A fascinating account of the history of peace and Christianity is found in Marcus Borg's 'Convictions'. In one of the chapters entitled 'Christians Are Called to Peace and Nonviolence' he points out that for the first three centuries of Christianity Christians refused to go to war. In this they followed Jesus who was a proponent of nonviolent

¹ <http://www.holytextures.com/2010/03/luke-19-28-40-year-c-lent-6-palm-passion-sunday-sermon.html>.

resistance. He didn't fight but he taught nonviolent resistance. He wasn't isolated in his approach – for example in the 40s AD there were nonviolent demonstrations in response to the emperor Caligula planning to erect a statue of himself in the Temple in Jerusalem. Of course, as we know from the Bible, there were other factions too – rebels wanting to fight (known as zealots) and those who collaborated with the Roman oppressor and were shunned by their own people but had a good life under Rome.

First Christians followed Jesus' example in teaching a different way. In Romans 12 we read: 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' (14.16-21)

But then in 313 the emperor Constantine legalised Christianity which by the end of the century became the majority religion. This also was the time when there were increasing attacks on the empire. The questions arose – what was the Christians' duty? Leave defending the empire to the minority of non-Christians? Or take up arms?

In those circumstances St Augustine introduced the teaching of a just war which permitted Christians to support and to participate in war. But there were certain conditions that had to be observed. First of all that war could only be in self-defense and a last resort. So we've tried everything else, it didn't work, we need to defend our empire. But one couldn't start a war. Once you were at it, you had to act as humanely as possible. This was the best Christians came up with under the circumstances – they didn't endorse war but tried to limit violence perpetrated during it.

The Middle Ages saw the birth of holy war theology. The crusades were initiated to recapture the Holy Land from the infidels who had occupied it for centuries at that stage. War was seen as a battle between good and evil. We, European Christians, were the good ones of course, the Muslims the bad ones. God was on our side and the Muslims therefore were not only our enemies but also God's enemies. That's why anything goes – you can kill civilians and destroy without limit because you're fighting God's holy war. It has to be said that even though this theology is part of Christian history, today it is largely condemned.

Borg points out another approach to war and that is conventional acceptance of it. By the year 1000 Europe was Christianised so all wars within Europe were conducted between Christian nations. Most Christians took it for granted that God was on their side and their cause was just. The example of it would be Gott mit uns – God with us – on German soldiers' belt buckles during the Second World War. But in all honesty everyone – British, Poles, French, Americans etc. etc. – all believed that their cause was just and God was blessing them in their struggle.

Yet the Bible says: you shall not kill. Jesus advocated nonviolence his entire ministry. He rode in on a donkey to Jerusalem knowing that his last battle will be there. He died on a cross because he refused to call angels to fight for him. Borg therefore asks: 'Nonviolent resistance to evil, including the evils of injustice, should be the primary Christian response. If Christians in this country and elsewhere were to do that consistently, what might this world be like?'²

Are we ready to follow the Prince of Peace riding on a donkey? Amen.

² Convictions: a Manifesto for Progressive Christians, Marcus Borg, p. 208.