

March 24, 2013

We opened our worship today with the Palm Sunday story. We often confuse the way Jesus acted as humility when, in fact, it is probably more correct to say that he acted with peace and vulnerability. He surrendered his power, in sharp contrast to the crowd, and exposed himself to the forces at play in Jerusalem.

In our second reading, Paul reflects on how Jesus presented himself to the world. It is really a discussion of how Jesus defined success and how he used his status with God. For us, today, it is instructive to listen to these words about how Jesus behaved and contrast that with the actions of the crowd on the roadside. Even more, how does it fit with how we live our faith. Are we happily lost in the crowd or are we ready to stand out front and be known for what we believe? Listen to what Paul says.

Philippians 2: 5-11

⁵Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. ⁶He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. ⁷Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!* ⁸Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion.

⁹Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, ¹⁰so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, ¹¹and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God!

Sermon – “A different model of success”

One of the first stories a child hears when they join Brownies or Cubs is:

- The Law
- The Promise
- The Motto

Even decades later most of us can recite these genes of wisdom.

BUT today's scripture readings brought to mind something else from my early days in Brownies which is a handshake.

I remember the details of the story Brown Owl told: A handshake with the right hand signifies that you laid down your sword => Lord Baden-Powell

instituted the left handed shake from his war experiences -> where African warriors laid down their swords to demonstrate their posture of peace.

To be without a sword, you can't attack.

To be without a shield, you can't protect yourself.

=> ultimate statement of vulnerability, peace, hope, trust.

That's how Jesus entered Jerusalem -> that's the model of success that Paul urged the Philippians to emulate.

Too often we get distracted by the crowds and palm-waving and the energy of the crowd and risk missing the powerful/subtle message embodied by Jesus.

Jesus entered Jerusalem visibly, fully exposed – he moved steadily towards his goal – his values, his strategy intact – his notion of what constituted “success” clear and unwavering.

Like Lord Baden-Powell's left-handed shake that opened him up fully to an enemy, Jesus rode a donkey – too slow to carry him away from an enemy – too short to intimidate an enemy BUT just right to make a clear statement:

“I'm here and this is what I stand for”

This week I went from the scriptures to the commentaries and then onto the internet to dig deeper because something was niggling in my soul.

It was the crowd – the focus of our worship – what we all associate with this day.

We love the palm parade and the “Hosanna” hymns but this is not what Paul tells the Philippians to learn from.

The force that distracts us is herd or mob mentality.

One reason for herd behaviour is that people and animals tend to do what others around them are doing. This usually is because those who join the group in the behaviour figure that if several others are doing something, it must be worthwhile, or they would not be doing it. www.wisegeek.com

A research study from the University of Leeds in England concluded:

Researchers discovered that it takes a minority of just five per cent to influence a crowd's direction – and that the other 95 per cent follow without realizing it.

R. Navert “Herd Mentality Explained” www.psychcentral.com

If we apply this to our Gospel story today... 95% of that crowd waving their palms had no clue why – had no investment in the cold, hard reality of Jesus' future – had no clue about the tragedy ahead.

Mob or herd situations mean most people are anonymous – they have little invested in the situation – they take minimal risk.

Nowhere has this been truer in the last week than the rape trial in Stubenville, Ohio.

All of it is getting played out in the social media where you can be part of a large anonymous crowd.

Twitter and Facebook have been abuzz mostly with posts, vilifying the rape victim! Ignoring the witnesses to the rape who photographed, videoed and tweeted the rape itself!

The Globe and Mail had a series of articles on the subject this week – journalist, Erin Anderson: “Twitter has become a revealing worldwide feed for our more monstrous natures” (19/03/13)

Anderson refers to:

The New Yorker included an article in January. “Twitter... has become a dark playground for all manner of racists, anti-Semites and bigots.” Twitter isn’t designed for bystanders. One hateful tweet is only as loud as the crowd of followers who do nothing in response.

“Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself” begins Paul.

If you’re trying to figure out who you are as a person of faith, what success looks like for a believer, how you should act in private and in public... then the place to start is NOT with the crowd but with Jesus.

- Our lives must embody peace which is a rich, broad concept – far more than happiness or the absence of conflict, peace is justice, mercy.
- Peace is the courage to be known for who you are and what you believe in.
- Peace is exposing yourself to the world – being open to God’s agenda and not simply your own.
- Peace is stepping out of the crowd to stand up for what is right and true.

Eliz Shively, NT professor at St. Andrew’s University in Scotland, writes about Paul’s advice to the Christians:

“Paul does not call on individuals to imitate Christ in the privacy of their prayer closets, but he calls on the community to imitate Christ as individuals live among one another.” www.workingpreacher.org

To succeed is to be known by what you stand for, to be known for what/who you believe in, to be known as one who speaks and acts consistently with peace, integrity and mercy.

You can’t do this lost in the crowd.