

Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015. Mark 11:1-11 Nigel Taber-Hanilton

Do you remember June 5, 1989? Let me help you: a young man in a white shirt, with black pants, holding some plastic bags standing in the middle of an almost empty street around noon on a hot summer day, gesticulating.

Up to that moment the day has been quiet - almost no movement, the city completely subdued.

The man is stopped in the middle of the road – right in front of a column of tanks. Instead of running over him, the first tank tries to go around, but the young man steps in front of it again. They repeat this maneuver several more times before the tank stops and turns off its motor. The young man climbs on top of the tank and speaks to the driver before jumping back down again. Soon, the young man is whisked to the side of the road by an unidentified group of people and disappears into the crowd.

The tanks move on down the road– Chang'an Boulevard – that leads to Tiananmen Square.

In the preceding days the empire had violently suppressed the protests that preceded this day; the army is in complete control of Beijing. But when all protest in the city seems silenced, the world witnesses this one final act of defiance.

To this day, who the young man was and what became of him remains a mystery. Some say he was never identified and is still living in Beijing; others that he was able to escape to Taiwan, still others that he was arrested and executed. We'll probably never know. But who could forget that moment and those images.....knowing what had gone before – the massacre in Tiananmen Square, the brutal, violent suppression of dissent, we all had a pretty good idea of what was going to happen to that young man if the Chinese authorities got their hands on him.....

He became a symbol for all who oppose tyranny who say “we will not go silently into the night” (to paraphrase the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas), and inspiration who lives on and will live on beyond the short life span of the other mortals who opposed him. We remember his actions even if we don't even know who he was.

On Palm Sunday, and during the week that follows, Jesus repeatedly stands in front of the Roman tank column.

Palm Sunday sets the tone for the coming week. This moment is a study in contrasts: The Prince of War, Pontius Pilate – who's sole purpose is to intimidate, to bring the might of Empire and elitism – arriving at the Western gate of Jerusalem on the road from Caesar Maritima, with his heavily armed soldiers and cavalry – not, coincidentally – passing the place of execution outside that gate that had the local name of Golgotha.

And the Prince of Peace, Jesus from Nazareth, coming with the folk who had been with him all along: the artisans and workers, the sinners, the possessed, the sick and blind, women, and foreigners: the ordinary folk; people like you and me. Jesus entering through the Eastern gate, the

Lion's Gate (the gate reserved for kings) riding a donkey, the sign of a king coming in peace,

It was clearly a staged entry – perhaps the most complete act of political theater in a Book replete with acts of political theater:

- the donkey saying “here comes the King in peace;
- the palm branches used by pilgrims to make the booths for God to dwell in as they journeyed to Jerusalem for the Festival of Booths, the celebration of God's presence with us – saying, God is with this man Jesus in a special way...**and he is with us.**
- And the cry, “Hosanna!” – one way to understand that chant is to think of people with a fist in the air chanting “Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!.....

I wonder what all the other people entering Jerusalem from the East along side Jesus and his small group – the majority– must have thought? Some would have known him, but most of them? Probably not. For the great majority, who likely knew little of Jesus, this set of symbolic actions and words would have made the meaning inescapable – like the man in front of the tanks – a heart-moving AND a heart-wrenching moment when anyone who understood what Rome would do – and that meant everyone – must have realized that such an action on Jesus' part was tantamount to signing his own death warrant.

And for some there would have been a deeper meaning. The Hebrew word “Hosanna” has a complex set of meanings and thus of translations, and one was this “Lord save us!” In the face of the immense bravery (or, for some, the immense stupidity) that challenging, even goading, Rome so obviously and so brazenly reflected, the crowd certainly understood something about Jesus; saw the presence of God in him. And for some (many?) the possibility that he might, just might, be The One.

But there's something else I think we overlook – in part because if we overlook it in the crowd, we can overlook it in ourselves: seeing Jesus' actions forced some in the crowd to look inward to the likely outcome and reflect. When I see someone acting in a selfless way, when I see someone standing up for what's right, even at a cost to themselves, how do I respond? How am I doing on the integrity meter? Do my words and actions match well with the standard set by my faith?

No wonder some in the crowd cried “Lord, save us!” Save us not only from the evils of Empire, but, more personally and profoundly, “save us from ourselves,” “save us from the evil we know we do – have done, will do.”

In re-enacting that moment of procession – even in the sedate, Episcopal way! – we, too, are recognizing that if we wish to stand with Jesus, if we wish to see Jesus, we have to see, too, the evil that his actions confront. They are sometimes our evils as individuals; they are always our evils as part of the human race: humanity's evils, humanity's inhumanity.

I'd like to think that I'd be a part of Jesus' procession – the one that speaks for peace and justice – if I were in Jerusalem somewhere around 29 A.D. I don't want to accept that I'd also be a part of that other procession – the one that accompanies Pilate, and is all about Empire, and power,

and control.

Part of the struggle of this day is the struggle within each of us; if we're honest we're forced to recognize that we're a part of both the processions of this day – and that's a hard realization to accept, let alone embrace.

The world is sometimes a cruel place; or perhaps (more accurately) it's that sometimes we humans are cruel beings. If we only embrace the exuberance of Jesus' joyful procession, and ignore the other, darker march that we sometimes make we lose touch with our own personal responsibility, our own need for repentance, and, in the end, any possibility for the restoration of that mature humanity promised to us by God.

In the end, though, it's to that more obvious, more welcome exuberance of Jesus' procession that defines this day, defines it because it is such a profound statement of hope, and as we re-enact the day so we share in making the statement.

Beyond the symbolism and metaphor, beyond the recognition of what this brash maneuver is going to cost Jesus, beyond the self-conviction of our role in all the crucifixions our species has perpetrated, we're doing something else, we're recognizing and claiming that this entry into Jerusalem was – is – a moment of hope; who cares what the self-interested structures of the Empire will do to us in the future, who cares what the misguided actions of other human beings will mean for us down the road; at least at this moment we can hope; hope for peace, hope for relief from oppression, hope for the freedom that Passover promises, hope in the face of daunting might, hope in the face of overwhelming odds.....at least....at the least....we can hope.

This coming week invites all of these reflections, as day turns to night turns to day: of those places where we fall short of the glory of God, for ourselves and toward each other; and of the hope that God's gifts might come to fruition within us, the hope for new life, the hope for salvation, for the fulfilment of all that is right, and good, and joyful.

May your week be fruitful in reflection, and, in the end, joyful in completion.

