

SERMON FOR PALM SUNDAY 2015
St Johns Co-operating Parish

READINGS: Philippians 2:5-11
Mark 11:1-11

What a cricket match! Was anybody here at it? I watched the faces of those interviewed after NZ had won and they were so pumped up, if you'd harnessed the energy you could have lit up Auckland for a year! Watching it on TV, or listening on the radio is one way of participating in such an event – but to **be** there – now that's something altogether different.

Being part of a large crowd focussed on the same thing is an experience of shared, corporate energy. However, there are also times when being part of a crowd can be a very uncomfortable experience because you are seen to support something questionable. When I see the mass rallies in North Korea for instance, I am sure that there are numbers of people who would rather be anywhere but there but for whom participation is compulsory.

Today we think of the crowd that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. You get the feel that there was a sense of abandonment about them. They yelled and danced, tore branches off trees and waved them about, took their coats off and laid them down in front of the donkey that Jesus was riding. This was a carnival. The atmosphere was full of fun and joy.

It's worth remembering that these people lived under the occupation of Rome. Conditions were harsh and repressive. They were forced to do things they felt were wrong and unfair and their national identity was constantly being crushed. Life was usually pretty grim. So having the opportunity to let their guard down, spontaneously join in a fun parade was a delightful change.

On the surface it may have appeared to be merely a bit of fun but there was another layer to this parade - a deeply subversive one. This was a special time of year in the Jewish calendar when the people recalled being released from another occupying power – Egypt. This was the eve of the Passover when the story of their liberation was retold with powerful symbols and language.

This was no ordinary time of year but one in which the atmosphere was charged. These folk, knowing their scriptures, recalled the words in Zechariah that said “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” At the top of their minds was the possibility and the longing for another liberation to take place. Maybe God would engineer it again, as he had before. Maybe this Jesus would take on the Roman authorities as Moses had the Egyptian ones. This was their dream.

The Romans were completely ignorant of any meaning being attached to this noisy carnival, but as they chanted and danced and waved their branches about they were actually thumbing their noses at the mighty Roman Empire and rehearsing their hope for freedom.

But, one wonders, did they really know themselves what was being played out? Did they know the meaning Jesus attached to his action?

Some probably had an inkling. They had either experienced or heard of Jesus’ teachings and actions and they would have been glad to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem – the seat of both religious and political power. But others were simply there for the hell of it. Any chance to undermine Roman authority and assert their national identity was to be grasped. So joining in chants from their scriptures and welcoming an itinerant Rabbi was a great way to safely challenge Roman power. It was like saying, “You think you have an iron grip on us but we’ve got news for you.”

Rome hated this time of year. If ever there was going to be trouble it was during the Passover celebrations so reinforcements were always sent for to deal with the very real threat of riots.

It's not inconceivable that these two events took place at the same time - Jesus entering Jerusalem at one end of the city surrounded by a carnival of followers, and Pilate, with the reinforcements, entering at the other end amidst a very different parade – a parade that was meant to intimidate the populous into submission by its show of power.

We see many such parades on our TV screens from a whole variety of countries – tanks, rockets, soldiers galore marching past the Big Wig, whoever he or she might be, saluting to show obedience to the state. And the purpose for such parades? Exactly the same as it was all those years ago – to impress, to show power, to frighten the enemy but reassure the public so that they will only feel secure if they support this powerful regime.

What a contrast! Pilate at one entrance, accompanied by troops and flags and weapons, riding a magnificent warhorse; Jesus at the other entrance, riding a donkey accompanied by a laughing, singing, dancing crowd waving foliage instead of swords.

But they did have one thing in common. Both came in the name of peace – one to keep the peace the other to bring peace. As the story unfolds, what do we find? Jesus' efforts to bring peace led him to crucifixion, yet while dying he sought peace for the perpetrators of evil and found peace as he gave his spirit into God's hands. Pilate, on the other hand, sought peace by washing his hands of responsibility and caving in to the cries of the crowd. He lived the rest of his life in the shadow of that decision.

These two contrasting positions are not abstract ideas. They represent choices that pepper our everyday lives and our national decisions. Let's just look at 3 examples.

Firstly let's look at the issue of road rage. Who of us hasn't been on the end of someone doing something utterly foolish on the road, nearly causing a serious incident, or perhaps actually causing one? At the time we have an instant decision to make as to how we will react. I'll be surprised if your reactions are very different from mine. My immediate one is anger. "You idiot! What do you think you're doing! You could have killed someone!"

But who of us hasn't had a momentary lapse of concentration and been the one who made that silly mistake that almost caused an accident? If we take a moment for reflection, we might remember our own capacity to make mistakes and that will lead us to react in a whole different way. One way will escalate anger, strip someone of their dignity, and create an atmosphere of animosity and reprisal. The other will help a person face their mistake and learn from it because no defensiveness has been generated because no blaming or abuse were employed. In one scenario two angry, upset drivers leave the scene, causing more possible road hazards. In the other, two drivers leave aware that they need to be vigilant because anyone can make a mistake at any time. Two different uses of power with very different outcomes.

The second example. Just recently a great New Zealander died. Celia Lashlie was a champion for those who found themselves in prison or on the way to prison and she got herself in plenty of hot water because of it. Coincidentally my book group was reading, "A Journey to Prison" when she died, so our discussion was sharpened by that news. It's a powerful book written from her experience of working in prisons and in social service agencies amongst those whose choices have led them into conflict with the law. Never does she flinch from the need to hold people accountable for their criminal offending and particularly for its impact on the victim. But, and it's a big but, neither does she flinch from placing some of that responsibility on the society that turns a blind eye to poverty, allows difficult young people to drop out of sight, doesn't care enough to properly resource programmes addressing addictions or domestic violence etc. And most of all she holds us accountable for the attitudes

we display that isolate ex-prisoners who are trying so hard to change their way of life but cannot shake the label or the shame.

It's a very complex issue. Tougher penalties, harsher conditions, longer sentences are frequently called for especially after some particularly awful crime. And it's perfectly understandable at one level. But does it actually do any good except placate the public? Will it change behaviours? Address underlying issues? Create men and women who will make good, useful citizens, caring parents of their young?

Celia Lashlie saw prison as a space that could, given the right resourcing, help men and women face the motivations and mind sets behind their offending leading to significant changes. But to make it work it also required a society that was willing to accept these folk upon their release and incorporate them into the play centres, the churches, the coffee bars, the sports clubs that make up our communities. Without this they were forced back to old ways because it was just too hard, too lonely.

Harsher penalties is one way of keeping the peace. Working toward self-awareness that brings change is another way of bringing peace.

The third example. As we know, New Zealand is sending troops to Iraq as part of a coalition to bring peace to that area of the world. It's a paltry contribution, that's undisputed even by those promoting it, but it's about what's expected if you are a member of "the club"; it's about making the world safer, NZ safer, so we are told. It's a controversial move and one that I'm sure, if this Church community is like every other one I know, will have the full spectrum of opinions within it.

It represents one way of keeping the peace. But this is another. In an article written by Toby Manhire he offers an alternative:

But what about spending the \$65 million cost of the deployment instead to multiply our aid contribution 66-fold? Or, what about this. Iraq, Syria and surrounding countries are swollen with refugee camps from years of war.

The civil conflict in Syria, within which Isis has flowered, has driven about four million people from their homes. About 380,000 of the displaced, according to the UN refugee agency, are especially vulnerable and requiring resettlement. It is this group, many of whom are victims of torture and rape, and orphaned children, that a new Amnesty campaign, Open To Syria, is focusing on as it urges rich countries to increase their refugee intakes.

New Zealand's quota of 750 refugees a year - a feeble per capita number by world standards - has not increased since the mid-1980s.

A contribution to the struggle against Isis, a way of doing something both substantial and richly symbolic, would be to double that number and welcome blameless Syrians to resettle in New Zealand.

Palm Sunday highlights the conflicting voices that surround us. But it leaves us with two questions that help us find our way within this confusion and they are these:

What is **God's** peace and where do **we** put our trust?

We have to choose what kind of peace we want. Do we want a peace that comes through simplicity, reconciliation, justice and mercy? Or do we want a peace that is kept by domination, ruthless power and a show of might?

In the end the answer comes down to a choice between a donkey and a warhorse.