

LENTEN STUDY 7 Palm Sunday (Luke 19: 28-40)

At the beginning of Holy Week, as Jesus mounted the colt in a procession so full of promise, an utterly exhausted Jesus crashed, emotionally drained. Run ragged by the constant call of the madding crowd's insistent clamour, his whole being was convulsed by an inner battle to bend his human will to God's call and by the incessant phylactery-fiddling fault-finding Pharisees and their religious cronies who had issued a fatwa to crush him, because too successfully, he had taken away their congregation. Jesus signed his own death warrant when he raised Lazarus. After this, 'many ...believed in him. The chief priests and the Pharisees said, "What are we to do? If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will destroy our holy place and our nation." Caiaphas, who was high priest, said, "...it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.'" The new Moses was there, right in front of them, and they could not recognize him because he didn't fit their expectations of a Messiah. It had always been so. Thirty-three years before, when the magi sought directions to the Babe in Bethlehem, the keepers of the law could give directions thither and yet be completely unconcerned about going themselves. (Matt. 2:3-6) By Jesus' time, not only were the religious leaders the blind guides, they were getting quite a considerable kickback from selling sacrificial animals at exorbitant prices and money changing fees. When Jesus would chase the sellers and money men from the Temple, he created an unholy alliance between the city business interests and organized religion. Together, these conspired to kill him for he had upset their cash register.

As Jesus looked towards the city that would kill him, he shook with nervous fear and sadness as anyone on death row would at the thought of the horror of a Roman scourging that would flay the skin off his back and drain from him litres of blood, reducing him to near unconsciousness, and then suffer the excruciating agony of carrying his cross-beam to the killing field there to suffer a most cruel death from pain and asphyxiation. The prophetic words of the aged Simeon were coming to pass: "This child is destined to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed."(Luke 2: 34) His humanness rose to question his mad action. There was still time to detour around Jerusalem and scurry away into the nearby wilderness to continue his ministry elsewhere. There was no turning back for the Suffering Servant of God. His face was set like flint to go to Jerusalem. He had to summon up a passion to rival the Passion he would undergo, a strength to face violence, derision, hatred and pain, a strength to drive him through this time of horror. The passion in him must be greater than his human need for security and survival. Even if a way out opened, Jesus, being Jesus, could *not* have taken it. No, he won't just slip in to Jerusalem through a side gate; he will head a parade.

What thoughts flooded his mind as he rode the plodding donkey ready for his final self-emptying service that would end in death? He came following Zechariah's oracle: "Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey." (9:9) He rode in a briefly triumphant parade, as the ragbag crowd strewed their dusty, sweat-stained cloaks to make a royal carpet for their king. He knew this was a mass response, and a mass response is often more loud than deep. He knew that the very crowd who praised "Hosanna to the Messiah, to the long-expected anointed of God," could quickly suffer a mood change and become ugly.

Have I ever been carried away by a manipulated crowd or commentator, or a media event with its unchecked enthusiasms? Such can carry us to places, people or things we would not ordinarily embrace and we become susceptible slaves to fashionable ideologies. Hype can so easily distort the truth, blur good judgement and cause us to choose expediency over integrity.

This parade was the only time that Jesus, who gave his all, accepted something akin to hero-worship from the people. Jesus looked toward the city and gasped, "**One who betrays me is with me.**" (Luke 22:21) Judas was no beady-eyed, sneaky, weasly plotter for a price. He was the group's trusted treasurer, stingy, yes, but no one thought of him as a traitor. He was a fully responsible agent with a free will; outwardly, he was not the picture of evil. He did not stand out as the black sheep of his family, nor had he been a juvenile delinquent; he was not the default bad guy. He had been with Jesus from the start, but did not know him; he had no relationship with Jesus; he couldn't relate to Christ's mission on earth. How do I line up here?

Jesus rode a humble colt. Not a powerfully-veined, muscular warrior's charger, and Judas snapped, disillusioned. Jesus had been born in the same town as King David's birth. Judas looked for a second warrior David who would rip the guts out of the hated Roman oppressors. But this meek milksop saviour preached gentleness, pardon, peace and love. He cared more for the blind, the lame, the hungry and leprous, the very worst folk! Disenchanted, Judas had backed a horse and got a donkey.

Who else would betray him? The crowd. They were an unpredictable, shallow crowd of city lazy-day layabouts. Easily swayed, they moved from wild cries of "Hosanna, blessed is the King who comes," for the Palm Sunday pop-star, to shouts of derision by Good/ God's Friday, as they would trail out following the shabby procession of the condemned with their cans of Fosters to hound him to his death with "Come down ya mug! Ava go! Save yourself!" Where would his disciples and friends be? Where would be the 5000 once-famished folk, now fed? Where were the once blind and lame and mad when Pilate cast that most dastardly public opinion poll, "Whom do you want? Jesus or Barabbas?" Their gratitude was a vaguely decent do nothing. They would stay silent from lack of interest since they were cured. Worse, would some even become those who passed by his cross and derided him? (Matt 27: 39)

The whole range of instincts and emotions which were at work in a crowd were focused on Jesus. Was I there, that day as a part of the crowd as a fair-weather friend of Jesus? I want to dissociate myself from any suggestion that I might be caught up in the mixed instincts of a crowd. Many visitors in the crowd (in town for Passover) would not have known what was going on, but got carried away. Do I ever take refuge in the crowd and protest "Everybody's doing it?" I identify with the Good Samaritan and condemn the priest and Levite who passed by. Yet honesty demands that I see in myself the same fickleness and instability that was evident that day.

Who else would betray him? At the Thursday Passover meal, James and John would argue who among the disciples would be the greatest? They even would have their Jewish mum, Jesus' Auntie Salome bail him up to demand the best places for here boys, closest to Jesus as royal princes in his kingdom. What a nerve! What an auntie! All that Jesus could promise a follower were places left and right of him on Calvary's cross. Because they would not be present when Jesus truly needed them, they must be apart of his death.

Who else would betray him? We fix on Judas and forget the blustering boaster, Simon Peter. He always let his tongue run ahead of his brain. (Being in a wet place, it was liable to slip when going too fast). Overconfident, Peter crowed his fidelity without knowing his weakness. "Lord, I'm ready to go with you to die." (Luke 22:23) "If all run away, I won't." Jesus will say "Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat." (Luke 22:31) Fellowship is no guarantee of faithfulness. What is needed is an ever deepening relationship with Jesus. As Simon Peter showed, we humans are flawed. We are made for fellowship with God, but if we choose freely to live without God, we miss the mark and fail to realize our potential. We refuse to be what God intended us to be; we refuse to do what we were intended to do; we refuse to live as we were intended to live. By our continual rejection of the choices we are given, the divine image, the nearest likeness to Jesus we could have, may be tarnished. But God never values us less. God longs for us to realize the potential with which we are individually endowed.

Even in our lost condition, we can come to our senses and are still as valuable to God as the lost sheep is to the shepherd, as the lost coin is to the owner, as the lost son is to his prodigal dad. As far as the mob was concerned, the woman caught in adultery was only fit to be stoned. To Jesus, she was fit to be given a new start. To his fellow Jews, Zacchaeus, the tax man, was only worthy of contempt. To Jesus he was worthy of fellowship. To Simon the Pharisee, the woman off the streets who anointed Jesus' feet, was a woman of notorious reputation and should be shunned. To Jesus, her action of anointing his feet with her tears spoke of a love which was beyond calculation, far more than that of the Pharisee himself. In spite of our flaws, God loves us and longs for fellowship. *Antiques Roadshow* tells us that a tiny flaw or tear or crack in an article can spoil the value as its ability to give the full and unalloyed pleasure for which it was created is marred. But, if the damaged object can be repaired, restored, replaced, its status can be revived. This is what *redeemed* means, the restoration of something one had formerly possessed but had lost at a cost. Our redemption price would be the death of Jesus. In him, God acted out something we could not do for ourselves, and at a cost we could not meet. The result was, our flaw will be covered by his blood; we will be "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven."

Peter is not a traitor but a denier. He alone will have the courage to follow his captive Lord when taken. But when the flickering firelight fell on his features, a servant recognized, "He also was with Jesus." At this accusation, Peter, with cursed denials and foul fishermen's oaths, will thrice dismiss he ever knew Jesus. The devastating cock will crow the verdict of his shameless guilt and weak betrayal in disowning his Lord. On Easter Day, Jesus will take this man back to the start, even calling him "Simon, son of John." Over a charcoal fire, the same as will be in the high priest's courtyard, where Peter made his denials, Risen Jesus will offer him three-fold forgiveness for his three-fold denials, before restoring him to leadership of the team once more. (John 21:15-17)

Who else would betray him? His disciples. Doubting, doggedly slow to come to full belief. Thomas will respond to "I am going away" with "Where? We do not know the way where you are going." (John 14:5) Thomas' two speeds of mental activity were dead slow and full stop. And a second disciple, Philip, is as dull as dirty dishwater. When Jesus will say "To know me is to know the Father," it seemed as if his ears were blocked. He seemed to have heard little of what Jesus had said in three years, so he implored, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Gently, Jesus will answer, "Philip, you've seen the fallen restored, the broken lives healed, and yet, you do not know me. I tell you, who has seen me has seen the Father." Then, on the night they will take their first

Holy Communion, Jesus would find himself terribly alone, feeling completely abandoned in Gethsemane. He will seek his disciples' support in watching and praying for courage and endurance only to find them snoring in hoggish slumber from excessive Passover wine. Moments later would come the lanterns to Gethsemane grove, then the Judas kiss, the sword and flashing panic of Peter, and, confronted with fight or flight, the disciples' terror made the decision, cowardice overtook them, and they all forsook him and fled into darkness.

Jesus could foresee that almost everyone would betray him. He was God's unrepeatable experiment come into our world as God's saving love in fragile human form, come, in an act of utter self-giving. His humanness wished fervently that things might be different, but, as he rode into Jerusalem, he was tempted to still compromise and settle for survival in a conspiracy of silence. But there could be no turning back. He knew, "Love never ends. It believes all things, bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (1 Cor. 13.7)

The early Christians saw in the passion and death of Jesus the triumph of failure. With the help of Scripture, they came to understand that this was precisely how Jesus triumphed and entered into glory. In the image given us in *Philippians 2*, he emptied himself of any wish to lessen or cheapen the Passion, but drank the cup to the full. Alone in the anguish of Gethsemane, the humanness of Jesus rose in fear: "if I am whipped within an inch of my life tomorrow, if I lose so much blood, will I have the physical resources left to carry the Passion through? My Father, if it is possible, let *this cup* pass from me; (is there some other way?) yet not what I want but what you want." (Matt.26:39) Jesus' passion was no play acting; it was real and it was freely chosen.

As he emptied himself by renunciation after renunciation, the vacuum was in-filled by love. He passed through death, rested as a good Jew on the Holy Sabbath and burst forth to new life on Easter Day completely transformed into a life-love power he wishes to send into you and me as we stumble along in this dusty old pilgrim caravan called the Anglican Church. The grave could not hold what had become perfect love. Jesus' suffering would have been a waste if he had not endured it all with love. It was not his suffering that saved the world, but his love. Love gave/gives us meaning to suffering. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, died because he loved his sheep. Now, he is with us in our suffering; we can never be alone as he was, since he has become Emmanuel, *God with us*. The Passion might have seemed a failure, a defeat, as the pair on the road to Emmaus desponded, but it was a victory. It would be the triumph of good over evil, of love over hate, of light over darkness, and of life over death. In the Passion story, the Suffering Servant Son absorbed all the violence, transformed it, and returned it as love and forgiveness, as he was transformed into perfect love.

We are lining up to march from Bethany to Jerusalem this Passion Sunday. Will the very stones speak out? No, only we can do that. Given his example, we cannot remain silent when a necessary word cries out to be said: a word of support in defence of someone who is being treated unjustly (and, given the daily appearances of boat people off our northern shores, there are many); a word of praise to someone whose earnest but hidden contribution may go unseen (and, there are many such in our busy parish); or a word of truth where untruth is being spread abroad. It is not easy to speak out. It is far easier and safer to remain silent. We can be a pompous Peter and loudly profess our faith in Sunday church, and then deny him over a cuppa immediately after. Jesus' promise is "Anyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven."