

“GREAT EXPECTATIONS”

LUKE 19:28-40; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

MARCH 24, 2013/PALM SUNDAY

What is God good for?

That sounds like fairly irreverent question to begin a Palm Sunday sermon, but I think it is a question that all of us have asked, at least in *some* form or another, at *some* point in our lives.

All of us have expectations of God, things that we *want* from God. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than Palm Sunday.

I want to begin with two stories of expectation from two groups of people. Two “scenes, if you will.

Scene one: The people have been living with, worshiping and following their God, in fits and starts, for a long time now.

They have a long history to look back on.

There have been times when God has intervened in their story as a people in dramatic and miraculous ways, times when God’s voice was clear and direct.

There have been times when their public and religious life was well-ordered and harmonious under God and king. There have been times when they have been hauled off into exile as judgment for their sin and selfishness.

And they are waiting expectantly. They are expecting God to act on their behalf. They are expecting liberation, justice, vindication. They want their oppressors to be put in their place.

They are expecting their God to act with decisive strength and overwhelming power, as in the past. They are looking back at their history with this God and longing for a return to the glory days when they had power and influence as a people.

They are expecting their God to prove, once again, that he is for *them* and not for their enemies.

They are tired of living in a complex and dehumanizing empire that doesn't share their values, that treats them as one more inconsequential group of conquered people... or worse.

They are longing for a change.

They are expecting God to reverse the shame that they feel at being an occupied, marginalized people.

They are looking at the promises made throughout their holy books—promises of blessing and prosperity, promises of other nations coming to them to pay homage to their God, promises of peace and justice—and they are expecting their God to act.

The people have in mind a nationalistic king, a conquering hero. They have in their minds the parting of seas and the striking down of Egypt's firstborns and David and Solomon in all of their majestic glory.

They are longing for a return to the past.

And they are expecting big things from God.

Scene Two: The people have been living with, worshiping, and following their God, in fits and starts, for a long time now.

They have a long history to look back on.

There have been dramatic moments when God has intervened in their story in miraculous ways. They have inherited a long history of a church being born with tongues of fire, of martyrs dying and emperors converting.

They have heard about reformation and renewal and about sweeping revivals and the advancing of the kingdom, the building of the church.

They have enjoyed a long history where the church was at the centre of their life and their community, where the church had influence and status in the broader culture.

But now they find themselves living in a complicated culture with many different religions and ethnic groups and ethical systems and philosophies and ideas—a culture that often doesn't share their values, that treats them as one more inconsequential group of "religious types"... or worse.

They are looking at the promises made throughout their holy books—promises of blessing and prosperity, promises of how Christ would build his church—and they are expecting their God to act.

They are unsettled and disoriented. They wonder why their churches are getting emptier, why their budgets are getting smaller, why the younger generation has little interest in maintaining the institutions they and their ancestors spend so much time developing.

They are longing for a return to the past.

And they are expecting big things from their God.

Two groups of people. Two times and places. Two different sets of expectations.

And over these two stories that are really part of the one big story... is God.

But not a God who conforms to expectations or responds to demands or fits the mold.

This God is... different. Unpredictable. Unsettling. Surprising!

This God takes on human flesh... is tempted... asks questions... listens... offends... comforts... heals... provokes... disorients.

This God walks the dusty pilgrim path up to Jerusalem at Passover time, fully aware of the eager crowd waiting expectantly for him to do what they've been wanting him to do and...

... asks for a small colt to ride on. Not a warhorse, as befits a conquering hero, but a colt, in fulfillment of the words of the prophet Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

The people rejoice when Jesus arrives—Hosanna! they shout, quoting Psalm 118.
“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

They have been waiting, they are ready. They can't wait for the story to begin to unfold.

But we know that, despite the fanfare of Palm Sunday, despite this “triumphal entry,” that this God will not meet expectations.

Expectant triumph will give way to apparent crushing defeat and disappointment.

This God will not conquer the Roman occupiers of his people Israel, nor will he assume the throne of David as so many were hoping he would do. At least not in the way they expected.

This God will bring peace not through the sword, but, only a week later, through laying down his life for his friends... and for his enemies.

This God will defeat evil, certainly, but by subjecting himself to its worst, taking away its sting, conquering the grave, and inviting his followers to live into the new upside down reality that he has demonstrated and made possible.

It is easy—too easy—to look back at those back in the first century who misunderstood the nature of Jesus’ kingdom and kingship, and think, “How could they have been so blind?”

It’s easy to do this throughout the biblical narrative, if we’re honest. How could those wandering Israelites have been so ungrateful and bitter? How could they have wandered after idols after what they had seen? How could they have not heeded the prophets who told them what to expect?

But one of my deepest convictions is that the story of Scripture is our story, too. It is a mirror that shows us ourselves.

And one of the lessons we ought to learn from our story today is that we are not so very different from those eager throngs of expectant worshipers on that first Palm Sunday.

As 21st century Christians, we, too, have our expectations.

We, too, have our clear ideas about what God is supposed to do, how God is supposed to work.

As Canadian Christians general, or Mennonites specifically, we look back at a time in our history when the church had more cultural influence, when our buildings were fuller, when our budgets were larger, when our institutions were more robustly supported, and we long for a return to those days. *How do we get them back?* we wonder.

Perhaps, like those first pilgrims who greeted Jesus to Jerusalem, we could use the reminder that God is full of surprises—that God has *always* been full of surprises, and often those who find themselves most surprised *were* and *are* the religious ones, those who have spent long years studying the ways of God, those quite convinced that they have this God figured out.

God is *always* building his kingdom, but not always in the ways that we might expect.

One of the texts from this Sunday that we didn't read is from Philippians 2:5-11. In it, Paul quotes what many scholars believe to be one of the oldest hymns or poems of the church, probably written only a few years after the first Easter.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

N.T. Wright: "This is a God who is known most clearly when he abandons his rights for the sake of the world."¹

It's easy to assume that *God* wants what *we* want, whether we're talking about a marginalized ethnic group in the first century longing for political liberation and a powerful king to defeat its enemies, or we are talking about a once influential church that all of a sudden finds itself seen as irrelevant by the broader culture and longing for a return to its proud and cherished past.

But I think that here, on this Palm Sunday, it is appropriate to ask the questions: What are we expecting of God? Do our expectations of God reflect our preferences or God's purposes for the world?

What *are* God's purposes?

Well, it's pretty simple, really. I want to read the beginning of Philippians 2 again.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (London: SPCK, 2002), 104.

Be like Jesus.

Don't cling to privilege, whether on an individual level, or more broadly at the level of our local, provincial, and national church.

Adopt a consistent attitude of humility.

Embrace a life a servanthood.

I want to close with a story from this past weekend at our Mennonite Church Alberta Conference in Calgary.

I had the opportunity to meet two new friends this weekend. Their names were Reuben and Reuben. They come from South Sudan and are part of a Sudanese church in Edmonton. They are exploring with First Mennonite Church in Edmonton the opportunities for worshipping in their Nuer language at their church, and about the possibility of becoming part of Mennonite Church Alberta.

They told me about their escape from war and deprivation in south Sudan, about their time spent at a refugee camp in Kenya, about their move to Canada, about the difficulties of adjusting to a strange new culture, and about the goodness of God in leading them to a place of safety and freedom.

On Saturday, they shared their story during the main session as well. They spoke about why they decided to approach a Mennonite church. When they had first come to Canada, the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers had welcomed them and helped them get settled. When looking for a place to worship, they remembered these Mennonites who had helped them. They remembered their commitment to peace and the dignity of all people. And that was enough.

The Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers began in 1982 with the mandate to "assist immigrants and refugees coming to the Edmonton area in achieving full participation in the community as well as contributing their experiences and skills to strengthen and enrich the lives of all Canadians."

It began out of an initiative of Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches in Edmonton.

It began out of a simple commitment to humility. To servanthood. To the sharing of privilege.

While hardly a week passes without some prominent article or interview or book hitting the shelves talking about the demise of Christianity in the West and in Canada, while we wonder about the future of our own Mennonite family, both nationally and provincially, while old realities give way to new and sometimes confusing ones, there *are* and *have always been* ordinary people among us who are heeding the call to have the mindset of Christ Jesus with everyone we meet.

And it is leading to life. It is leading to blessing and hope—for my new South Sudanese friends, and for us, as white, privileged Canadian Christians. Who knows what these dear people will teach us? Who knows what ways they will lead us into the future?

It is leading to surprises. It is leading to the kingdom of God advancing as it always has—in unexpected, mustard-seed kinds of ways.

After their presentation, Reuben and Reuben sang a song for us. It was the old hymn, “Rock of Ages,” but in the Nuer language.

About halfway through a number of people began to hum along with them.

It was a beautiful, holy moment in many ways.

These two men from South Sudan singing to the God who had liberated them from the bondage of war into a strange new land were now singing amidst a room full of “Mennonites”—a group of people they had never heard of before a few years ago, but whose commitment to humility, service, and “having the mindset of Christ Jesus” had led to a new future.

It was a beautiful snapshot of the new reality of the church in the postmodern, post—Christian multicultural world. More importantly, it was a foretaste of the kingdom of God.

Moments like these don’t automatically boost the church budget or the attendance figures. They don’t address the “youth question” or solve our disagreements about ethical issues.

But they give us another example that surprising, unexpected, “kingdom of God” things happen when we simply live our lives following the pattern of Jesus.

As we head out into Holy Week, may we remember that like those first pilgrims to Jerusalem, our expectations of God do not always match what God is up to in the world.

And may we renew our commitment to follow our King into suffering and shame, into misunderstanding and rejection, into service and humility, and into surprising and unexpected futures where the greatest twist in the story is yet to come.