

THE REDEFINING KING

LUKE 19:28-40

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

MARCH 20, 2016/PALM SUNDAY

We've arrived at Palm Sunday.

Jesus has made his way from Galilee in the north to the outskirts of Jerusalem, the city of the temple, the epicenter of the religious, social, and political life of the Jewish people, the city where his people anticipated that a king would come to liberate them from the hated Romans.

He stops at the Mount of Olives and he looks over the city. What does he see?

- A busy and bustling city
- A conflicted city
- A city where power is abused
- A city where the vulnerable and poor are oppressed and harassed
- A military state maintained by violence

This was, of course, precisely what Jerusalem under Roman occupation looked like when Jesus arrived.

About a week ago, I stood on the same mountain that Jesus stood on. I, too, looked out over the city of Jerusalem (2 pictures).

We had spent the previous four days in and around Jerusalem, learning about the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict... About the many blood-soaked years from the creation of the Israeli state in 1948 to the present. About two people struggling for the same piece of land.

All of this was whirring around in my head as I stood on the Mount of Olives and looked out at the city of Jerusalem.

- A busy and bustling city
- A conflicted city
- A city where power is abused
- A city where the vulnerable and poor are oppressed and harassed
- A military state maintained by violence

A divided city

It was sobering to think about how little things had changed in two thousand years.

I want to tell one story, to give you one image that will stick with me for a long time.

One of the daily realities of life in the region is checkpoints. These are heavily armed crossings guarded by the Israeli military where everyone must pass through when traveling across the border between Israel and the Palestinian territories.

In our case, this was from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. We had a morning off, so we hopped on a city bus to go see some of the sites.

So, we made it to the checkpoint. And the bus stopped.

And all of a sudden, people started getting up and exiting the bus in the back.

But not all the people. Only some. The Palestinians got up and began to make their way off the bus and to form lines outside beside the bus.

While the rest of us stayed in our comfortable seats on the bus, they waited outside. While the soldiers barely glanced at our passports, their documents would be heavily scrutinized.

As I watched this incredible scene playing out, it struck me how *utterly normal* it seemed to them. They scrolled through Facebook on their phones while they waited. One young woman idly played with her hair. One guy was reading a book.

This was just what reality looked like for them. Because they had a Palestinian ID card instead of an Israeli (or Canadian!) passport.

After a while, they began to make their way back on to the bus. The girl in front of me slumped back into her seat and resumed editing photos on her phone. The guy across from me stuck his headphones back over his ears.

Normal. And I sat there, incredulous. I felt guilty that I had just sat there—that I hadn't at least gotten off the bus and stood with them or something.

(I later talked to a Swiss friend at the conference I was attending who had done precisely this... Which made me feel even guiltier!)

How could such things be normal?

It seemed so ridiculously unjust, so dehumanizing, so *wrong*.

I had heard about such things before. But to actually *see* it in front of my eyes. It rattled me.

It was like this visual parable of the world we live in. A world where human beings continue to be divided along all kinds of lines, where we continue to think in terms of "us" and "them," a world of nasty and polarizing discourse, a world where a certain presidential candidate is talking about building another wall...

Jesus stood on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem two thousand years ago and he wept. Amidst all the celebration and anticipation of a coming king, Jesus wept.

He wept because the things that made for peace were hidden from their eyes. He wept because the City of God, the *people* of God refused to allow his vision of the peaceable kingdom to penetrate their hearts.

I didn't weep on the Mount of Olives. But I could have. Maybe I *should* have. The things that make for peace are still hidden from so many eyes.

The Holy City is still a city—like so many cities on earth—that refuses the things that make for peace.

And so we come to this Palm Sunday, 2016. We read about the arrival of a king.

N.T. Wright calls Palm Sunday “an object lesson in the mismatch between our expectations and God’s answer.”¹

The people in Jesus’ day knew what they wanted from God and from God’s anointed one.

They wanted a mighty king to rule from Jerusalem. They wanted the Romans out and a Jewish king in.

They wanted punishment for their enemies—all those who had held their boots over their necks for long years.

But this king is different.

This king 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 colt to ride on.

Not a warhorse, as befits a conquering hero, but a colt, in fulfillment of the vision of peace declared by the prophet Zechariah (Zech. 9:9-10)

This king 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, but, at least initially, by subjecting himself to its worst.

This is not the sort of king the people want.

This is a king who comes to turn everything upside down.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two* (London: SPCK, 2002), 69.

Whether we're looking at Jerusalem of two thousand years ago or the Jerusalem of today, it's easy to locate ourselves with Jesus on the Mount of Olives, weeping with Jesus for the state of the world, for all the violence, the injustice, the lack of peace.

But if we stay there on the Mount of Olives surveying the City of David, we haven't gone far enough. I am convinced that if we read a passage of Scripture and we don't look inward, we haven't read as well as we could have.

So, what does Jesus see, when he looks out at not over Jerusalem but over our own lives? Our own hearts?

Are we any better at recognizing the things that make for peace?

When Jesus looks at us, does he see the same attitudes and dispositions that are at the root of conflict around the world?

Does he see:

- anger
- fear
- suspicion of "the other"
- lust for power/control/domination
- a refusal to see from the perspective of others
- an unwillingness to forgive
- a hunger for building walls and maintaining boundaries

Each one of these is at the root of every conflict, from the geo-political to our personal relationships.

Each one of these represent a refusal to embrace the things that make for peace.

Each morning last week during our conference in Bethlehem, Mark Labberton, president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, led us in devotions. On Wednesday morning he described Christians in a very unique way, one I won't soon forget:

We are meant to be the redefining people.

The “redefining people.” What a marvelous description.

We are the people, he said, who daily live our lives not according to the things that we see, not upon the instincts that come so naturally to us as human beings, but according to the heart and mind of God, according to the future that God has made possible through Jesus Christ.

Just as Jesus redefined words like “king” and “kingdom,” those of us who call ourselves by this name all these years later are to be the ones who redefine what human lives and communities can and should look like.

We are the ones who choose the harder paths of love, of forgiveness, of tearing down walls, of trying to walk a mile in our neighbours’ shoes, of relinquishing control, of not needing to have power, of opening our hand and our hearts to our neighbours, even to our enemies, rather than closing them in fear and suspicion.

We are the redefining people.

Because we follow a redefining king.

Luke’s Palm Sunday narrative has one unique feature to it.

Only Luke’s version of the story brings us back to Bethlehem—to the announcement of peace and glory in the highest heaven.

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! **Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"**

These words echo the words of the angel in Luke 2:13-14:

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 **“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”**

Luke links the good news that was proclaimed in Bethlehem to the events that will now take place in Jerusalem.

The story that began with a cradle in Bethlehem moves toward a cross outside Jerusalem.

But even as Jesus begins his march down the Mount of Olives toward Jerusalem, even as we know that the cheers and celebration will soon turn to violence, we know this is not the end of the story.

We are resurrection people and so we know that Jesus' death is not an end but a beginning. We know that this Jesus will redefine what a king and a kingdom look like, what a coronation looks like, what "victory" looks like.

We know that the story that began in Bethlehem does *not* in fact end in Jerusalem. It ends with a new heaven and a new earth, a kingdom that is not defined ethnicity or human boundaries but of the will of God (John 1:13).

It ends not with death but with life.

I want to end my sermon this morning in Bethlehem as well. Or, *near* Bethlehem, at any rate.

Two Sundays ago, we worshipped in a little Evangelical Lutheran church in a town called Beit Sahour, which borders Bethlehem.

We celebrated communion with our Arabic sisters and brothers and we heard a powerful call from a young pastor to "not forget," as Western Christians, that there is a church in the place of Christ's birth.

On the back of the bulletin at this little church outside Bethlehem, I encountered one of the most profound "mission statements" that I have ever come across.

I want to read it to you:

In a little town called Beit Sahour—a town known traditionally as the shepherds' field, a town in which the Gospel of peace and reconciliation between God and man was first preached by the angels—lays our little evangelical Lutheran Church.

Our church is small in number; yet we believe that we have a message to deliver to the society in which we live. We believe that we have a message to deliver to the whole world. Our message calls for a culture of life despite all the cultures of death that are being spread in the world around us.

It was here that the Gospel was first preached when the angels declared, “peace on Earth and good will towards men.” It is our mission to continue to preach and live the message of this gospel. God has called us to live and serve our community and we aim to be a church that exists in our society, with our society, and for our society.

*We live in a society that is suffering due to the political, social, and economical situation; **however, we choose not to succumb to grief. Instead, we lift up the light of Christ, the light of Easter with which we are determined to light our lives, churches, and society.***

This is who we are; we are the children of the resurrection, and we want to spread out this good news all over the world.

Children of the resurrection. Another marvelous description of who we are and what we are called to be.

Because “resurrection” is the ultimate expression of what it means “redefine” reality, isn’t it? And “resurrection” is what we eagerly look forward to seven days from now.

May God keep our hearts and minds close to who he is and who he has called us to be, as we head out into Holy Week.

Amen.

