

Look, Your King is Coming!

John 12:12-19; Philippians 2:5-11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We've arrived at Palm Sunday, the threshold of the holiest week in the Christian year.

It's a day where there is a lot going on.

It's a celebration. The crowd is joyful and expectant as it shouts, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

It's a critique of power (or at least how power is usually wielded).

It's a display of irony, a kind of satirical street theatre (the donkey versus the war horse).

It's the culmination of Jesus' journey, from the outlying regions of Galilee to the symbolic centre of the Jewish world in Jerusalem.

It's an enacting of Jesus' teaching and ethic (most specifically in the Sermon on the Mount).

It's the arrival of Israel's true king.

It's also, for those of us who read the story all these years later, a bit of an ominous day.

There are dark clouds forming on the horizon. We know where the story is going. The king who is coming will wear a crown of thorns. His coronation will be a crucifixion.

Among the many things that Palm Sunday is, it is also the story of people getting Jesus wrong.

Every year on Palm Sunday I am struck by the gap between the expectant crowd and all they hoped for from this Jesus of Nazareth.... and what would happen in the week ahead.

I've been thinking about this all week.

I think most of us move through most of our days thinking that we mostly get Jesus right.

There is a sense in which this is a fairly boring comment on human psychology. We go through most of our days thinking we are at least *mostly* right about *most* of the things we believe, whether it's our political views, our views on social issues, how we think about the most important relationships in our lives, etc.

If we thought we were wrong, we would change our minds, right?

This isn't to say that we all walk around thinking we're infallible – that it's impossible that we could *ever* be wrong (some people do... we call them narcissistic psychopaths!).

But it would be psychologically crippling to walk around every day thinking, "I'm probably wrong about most of the things I believe." We would likely never get out of bed.

And yet, we know, at least in theory, that we *can* be wrong.

Palm Sunday reminds us that this can be true about how we think about and relate to Jesus.

Was the Jesus the crowd cheered on the outskirts of Jerusalem the "real Jesus?" Or was it a projection of what they wanted?

Did Pilate see the real Jesus? Did Peter? Judas? The Jewish religious leaders? Did Mary? Did the curious onlookers lingering around for another miracle like Lazarus see the real Jesus?

Did *anyone* see Jesus truly? The answer Holy Week gives us is, "no."

Jesus died on a godforsaken Roman cross. Alone. Abandoned. Betrayed. Misunderstood. Used. Rejected.

At the decisive moment in God's story, no one saw Jesus truly, as he was.

They didn't all get Jesus wrong to the same extent, but everyone saw something in Jesus that wasn't there or failed to see something important that was.

So, what do we do?

Jesus has entrusted himself and his message to us, but we have proved, then and now, that we very easily get him wrong.

Some see Jesus as a triumphant warrior-king licking his chops and getting ready for that "every knee will bow" part of our reading from Philippians this morning.

Some see only the humble servant from the first part of the reading.

Some see a Jesus who is only characterized by a vague and undemanding "love," a Jesus who exists only to bless and affirm our every identity and inclination.

Some see an activist Jesus who is fed up with our middle-class apathy and privilege and wants us to dive into the world of politics with righteous zeal.

Some see a harsh Jesus who wants us to talk mostly about his blood and our sin, and to believe in a highly specific theological package with sufficient strength to gain afterlife access.

Some see a kind of mushy liberal Jesus who wants us to talk about love and compassion racism and sexism and every other ism, but hardly ever about *himself* (that would be exclusive and intolerant).

So many Jesuses.

You've already heard about some of the themes of the past weekend at our MCA annual delegate sessions.

I would echo enthusiastically what was said about how good it was to see the joy and enthusiasm of some of the non-European churches. Their vitality was infectious. It did indeed hold out hope of a genuinely intercultural church in the future.

But what was rarely stated out loud, what I only heard whispered in furtive side conversations or what was tentatively gestured toward in workshops was an awkward reality.

The churches that supply the interculturality and diversity that we quite rightly love and long for, are also overwhelmingly more conservative theologically than many of the whiter, more European, highly educated churches, specifically when it comes to issues around sexuality, marriage, and gender.

I came to the awkward realization this week that I am now the longest-serving pastor in Mennonite Church Alberta (I don't feel old enough for this to be true!).

And over thirteen years, I can tell you I have heard this over and over again, often from non-white pastors, many of whose churches have now left our conference.

This is not a reality that is by any means unique to Mennonites. It is a phenomenon in the church across the Western world.

At one-point last weekend, a MC Canada representative told us that the strength of the global Anabaptist population is “south of the equator.” Only 16% of global Anabaptists are from Europe and North America.

Are we all talking about and worshipping the same Jesus?

And if not — if the progressive white Canadian Mennonite has a very different understanding of Jesus than the conservative Ethiopian or Sudanese or Vietnamese or Chin Mennonite — what do we do then?

We stand at the doorstep of Holy Week, and we want to encounter Jesus as he is. We want to see the real Jesus and to worship him (at least I hope we do!).

I want to point you to Jesus as he truly is, not the Jesus that reinforces my opinions, my assumptions, my preferences.

For the remainder of my sermon, I want to lean heavily on the words of the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. I read a sermon of his this week called “Different Christs?” that he preached at a theological college a while back.¹

I think he speaks powerfully to these challenging questions. And I think he offers us all a good word as we move out into Holy Week seeking to encounter Jesus truly.

Williams acknowledges that many of us do indeed have different visions of who Jesus is, what Jesus has done, and what it means. He begins with an important personal challenge:

First of all, there’s one painfully obvious thought. We worry about other people’s visions when we have the leisure to take our eyes off our own. If we were really preoccupied with, really in love with our vision, we’d have less time for fussing about someone else’s. This is the message in Jesus’ reply to Peter in John 21, when Peter sees the beloved disciple and asks what will happen to him: Jesus replies simply, “Mind your own business and follow me.”

Yes, and amen. Too often we spend more time obsessing about other people’s Jesus.

Those conservatives really need to pay attention to the Jesus who talks about social justice! Those liberals really need to remember that Jesus didn’t just come to give us an ethical system or an activist agenda, but to die for our sins!

It’s far easier to define ourselves by what we’re against or what we don’t like than by what (or who) we’re for. Maybe we should spend more time focused on Jesus himself than those we are convinced are getting him wrong (or less right than us!).

But we can’t stay there. Williams goes on:

But that alone can be pretty selfish and individualistic and can lead to a situation where we cease to care about the truth at all...

Then, I think, the question may be this: “Can your Christ save me as well as you? Can my Christ save you as well as me?” ...

¹ Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgment: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1994), 105-110.

How wide is our vision, how big is our God? If Christ can only save me and those who think as I do, God help us all! **But if I can conceive, if I can imagine with enough sympathy how the Christ of my brother or sister can be saving and lifegiving to him or her, if I can begin to see how and why that vision is *loved* and trusted — then we shall be some way forward.**

This seems hugely important to me. Perhaps we could each take this as our spiritual discipline for Holy Week (or for the rest of our lives!).

Whenever we come across a Christian whose vision of Jesus seems lacking or inadequate or outdated or naïve or even damaging — and I want you to think specifically of someone or some group who you are very convinced gets Jesus wrong — could we have the courage to ask ourselves (or them!):

“How and why does my neighbour love and trust this Jesus?” How is this Jesus saving and lifegiving?

This isn't easy, as Williams notes, but I think it is essential:

This needs patience. and care, and the refusal to assume that visions are exclusive. If I ask the question, “what is healing or lifegiving in your Christ?” **I can at least think it possible that there is Christlike reality in your thought and your life. It's not at all an indifference to truth, but a recognition that the most important truth about Christ is that he is resurrection and life.** And if I ask, “Can my Christ save you?” I am asking how far I have distorted Christ in me... It is not mere tolerance, this, but active *compassionate* understanding.

This last part is perhaps the hardest part. To acknowledge that we can and do distort Christ for our own ends. This is profoundly sobering to admit (especially for someone who stands up here each week!).

This was what the crowd on Palm Sunday did.

They craved a militaristic king who would lay waste to their enemies and set up his kingdom in Jerusalem. They had seen what Jesus could do in raising Lazarus from the dead. Surely nothing would be impossible for this king!

They had Jesus' entire agenda laid out for him and it certainly didn't include a cross!

But the cross was where Jesus was going. The cross is where we meet Jesus still.

If our visions of Jesus have little need of a cross, then I can confidently say that we have gotten Jesus profoundly wrong.

The cross is where Rowan Williams ends his sermon. The cross, he rightly says, challenges *everyone's* Jesus. He describes the cross and the eucharist through which we remember it as "binding realities":

To give the cross and the sacrament... authority as *binding* realities in the community **is to accept that we are to be questioned by them; that Christ... is not just there as an object of our investigation, but is a challenging and unsettling fact for all of us... interrogating our understanding of God and ourselves....**

When all the formulae, all the slogans, all the impassioned, sincere and no doubt inevitable theological disputation is over, then we have to get back on our knees and ask about our own fidelity to God's questioning, our own readiness to go into the desert when the security of pictures and ideas fades away, where all theologies finally give way to God.

If we are not at least occasionally unsettled by Jesus. If he doesn't puzzle or shock or confuse or irritate or offend us, if Jesus is pretty much just the figurehead of our political or moral team and not much else, then I think we can be pretty sure that we have created a vision of Jesus in our own image.

The cross interrogates conservative Christians and progressive Christians, black Christians, brown Christians, white Christians, male Christians, female Christians, rich Christians, poor Christians, gay Christians, straight Christians, old Christians, young Christians... Every Christian imaginable.

The cross is a provocation and an indictment. It is a demonstration of God's love and of human wickedness.

The cross exposes our ignorance, our fear, our selfishness, our pride. It holds these things up beside a mercy and a forgiveness that is barely believable.

The cross is the judgment and the hope of the world.

The last sentence of Williams' sermon is a powerful one: "He is the truth we shall never own; we can only hope to be owned by him."

This is indeed our only hope in a world where we only ever see in part, and where we still so easily and so often get Jesus wrong. We must never reduce Jesus to the smallness of our vision or our team.

Jesus is not our possession; he is our king.

And our king is coming, again, this Holy Week, 2024.

As we move into the week ahead, my prayer is that God would open our eyes and ears and hearts and minds to Jesus as he is.

That we would not shrink away from what we see. That we would allow ourselves to be undone and remade by the God he reveals.

Amen.

