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Lent 6: Return to the city (Matthew 21. 1-11)

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As poet T S Eliot once said,
'And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.'¹

Was that what it was like for Jesus, returning to Jerusalem, nearby, the place where he was born, the place where he argued in the temple, when he was pubescent, the place he came for major festivals, not far from his friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus' place?

He is making his way, creating the path, with his followers and the crowds stumbling in his wake, like flotsam and jetsam, not totally getting it at all, not until much later, if ever.

It is not an April Fools Day joke. Today is Palm Saturday, and our passage leads us towards the Passion, the death and resurrection of Jesus that we explore further next weekend. Today's events have their genesis in Jesus' strategy to bring himself and his message to Jerusalem. This procession, this return, is an expression of hope for change. The Jewish roots of Jesus' passion for change inform his march on Zion and reflect his people's vision that God would bring about a change beginning with Jerusalem. To affirm his vision of God's way and to live out its hopes in the present in action and symbol meant challenging existing structures of authority, both those of the temple leadership and those of Rome. This is the backdrop for the drama which follows. To journey with Jesus still means espousing a

¹ —T.S. Eliot, from "Little Gidding," Four Quartets (Gardners Books; Main edition, April 30, 2001) Originally published 1943.

challenge to the powers which hold sway in our world (and church), William Loader points out.²

And so, he was returning to the centre of power, returning after several years of ministry and working it out, returning to confront the powers that be, returning before Passover, with purpose.

'Jesus was not entering a foreign city, nor entering the city of 'the Jews'. He was a Jew. He was entering the city which symbolised in his faith and his scriptures God's promise to Israel. To confront one's own faith and its traditions is painful. This is part of the drama of the story.'³ says Loader.

This is not an historical event in which the whole of Jerusalem lined the streets, thronging the new Messiah. An actual entry with some shouts of praise doubtless occurred but would have been sufficiently lost in the Passover crowds as not to warrant the military's attention, the military who would have been swift to put an end to what could have seemed like a potential disturbance. Whatever the event, it is very symbolic.⁴

The entry into Jerusalem was the beginning of the end, the beginning of something new.

It is the beginning.

He has returned to the seat of power. This will not end well.

The beginning of the end it is.

He enters Jerusalem, riding on a donkey or two, a mother and her colt, organised by Jesus, found by the disciples. What's so important about that? Well, he didn't walk, and he didn't ride a horse. Matthew sees it as fulfilment of prophecy. This so-called king of the Jews rode on a humble donkey, a borrowed one at that. But some crowds still responded by laying out their garments, and shouting their blessings and praise, 'the crowd beside the road, reluctant, fully adoring, standing aloof in

² <https://billloader.com/MtPalmSunday.htm>

³ *ibid.*,

⁴ *ibid.*,

confusion or alienation, perhaps remembering key events from Jesus' ministry.⁵ Jesus still continues.

There were two processions that day some say: one mighty and regal and powerful, the other humble and homegrown and prophetic.

I would not want to pit one against the other. Yet, they both had some commonalities. They both involved ritual and expectation. They both involved crowds, bowing and admiring and hoping.

What about the figures riding, one on a horse with ranks of soldiers and finery, and another on a donkey? Who were these people and why were they here: One was returning to rule a subjugated state, one was returning to challenge power. One's power lay in this world, and the other's influence goes beyond this world?

'Scholars now surmise that Jesus' entry through the gate known as the Beautiful Gate, was a direct mockery of the Roman governor and his troops, likely on the very day a legion was arriving. And the mockery was the reason Pilate wanted Jesus dead. There was a whisper, a rumour. The Beautiful Gate was legendarily the one through which the Messiah would enter the City, and also the Gate through which the Shekinah, the spirit of Shabbat and a feminine shape of God, each week came at sundown on Friday to bring the sacred day to Jerusalem', says Nancy Rockwell.⁶

Jesus was playing on these themes, as well as the power of God's peace being more honourable than the power of war. Presenting a quite different image of holy power than did the Roman Empire, riding a donkey instead of a war horse, leading a legion of disciples in rags, wearing the armour of good will, Jesus entered the city on a dirt road. And the small crowds roared approval for this act of public theatre. No doubt Pilate considered it a revolutionary action, when he heard.⁷ This doesn't augur well for Jesus.

⁵ *ibid.*,

⁶ Nancy Rockwell <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/triumph-and-defeat/> accessed 31 March 2023

⁷ *ibid.*,

Jesus was on a journey. These words from the Iona community capture something of the meaning of the story:

It was on the Sunday
that he took on the city.

Religious freaks usually appear in the desert urging folk to come into the open air and find God through getting back to nature.

God, you see, doesn't live in the city.

God prefers the smell of a garden to that of a gutter.

God likes to see children jumping burns, not raking through middens.

And far better in God's eyes are lovers lounging in the long grass than coorieing up in a single bed.

The city is for sin.

God doesn't go there.

The Lord is my Shepherd, not my social worker.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures, not shrinks' couches.

He leads me beside still waters,
not trickles of urine from a beggar's bladder.

And on the mountains are the peace messenger's feet beautiful,
not in the middle of the road.

It was on the Sunday
that he took on the city.⁸

'This is the fateful entry which will take Jesus to his death. The dramatic irony which celebrates Jesus as king and reaches its climax with Jesus crowned king of the Jews on the cross, is beginning. The scene is full of danger and denseness.'⁹

Jesus' approach to Jerusalem has become for many a symbol of the confrontation we must make, including the confrontation with ourselves. The issues at stake are not ultimate control or power, though it is easy to give this impression: Jesus is the rightful king! For then might dictates the terms and we reinforce the theme that might is right and right is might

⁸ from stages on the way, worship resources for Lent, Holy Week and Easter, the wild goose, worship group, willow connection Pty, LTD 1998

⁹ Loader

and reproduce its abuses in the swirl of deduction. The true signs of messiahship have less to do with palms and crowns, which ultimately must be subverted into irony on the cross, and more to do with acts of healing and compassion.

A radically subverted model of power exercised in compassion challenges the temple system and Rome in its day and their equivalents in our own, around us and within us.¹⁰

So, what are the implications for us? I think there is the challenge to face our fear both internal and external, within ourselves and beyond, to come back, to challenge our egoic power knowing we are not alone. To stand up to inequity, to speak when speaking is needed. To head home.

The earthly Jesus is with us. One who has transcended boundaries is with us. The one who created and transforms us is with us inviting us to face, our fears, to face oppression, to face our shadow, to stand tall. To walk with Jesus into the capital and beyond, to the death of illusion, and to take on new life in humility. The journey to take on the city continues. And so, many of us rally tomorrow, in support of asylum seekers and refugees, being present, and speaking out to power and to all in solidarity with those seeking asylum in this land.

It was on the Sunday
that he took on the city.¹¹

¹⁰ <https://billloader.com/MtPalmSunday.htm>

¹¹ from stages on the way, worship resources for Lent, Holy Week and Easter, the wild goose, worship group, willow connection Pty, L T.D 1998