

A Fool for Christ

Palm Sunday

Luke 19:35-44; John 12:9-19; Zechariah 9:9-10

Richard A. Rhem
Lakeshore Interfaith Community, Mother's Trust
Ganges, Michigan
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When, some months ago, Tapas invited me to speak today, he reminded me that it would be April Fool's Day and wondered if I might like to use the phrase from St. Paul – "A Fool for Christ." I consulted the calendar and realized April 1 was also Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week on the Christian Calendar. I immediately agreed on the theme because I have always felt that in the events of this week one sees the very heart of Jesus' ministry and one who seeks to follow the way of Jesus as it comes to expression in the events of this week must, by human or worldly standards, be a fool. We all know what a fool is but I got the dictionary out nonetheless –

...one who is lacking in reason or common powers of understanding; a person with little or no judgment, common sense or wisdom; to act in a ridiculous manner; to do silly things...

Such is the definition of a fool.

What has that to do with being a fool for Christ? Well, as I am using that designation on the threshold of Holy Week in the Christian Calendar, I am suggesting that from the perspective of worldly wisdom, from the perspective of common sense, to follow the way of Jesus is foolhardy because it is to live out an ethic of love, specifically of non-violent resistance to the systems and structures by which human society is ordered. It is to pursue the way of peace in a violent world – to live with compassion in a brutal world – to seek justice in a world marked by injustice – to live in love in a hostile world.

And why is such a way of life the way of a fool? Simply because to live in the way of vulnerable love is to court death by the powers that be, powers of church and state, the established institutional structures by which our world is ordered and controlled.

Let me be clear at the outset –

- 1) The Way of Jesus that beckons me has not been realized in my own life; it is an amazing ideal which draws me but which I have betrayed.

- 2) In this setting I want to be very clear that the Way of Jesus is my way, my story, but not the only way, the only story – not the only dream and vision for a transformed world – but I speak out of my own tradition, grateful for a place like this where our respective stories are shared and respected – where our shared stories enrich us all in our respective journeys.

With those comments made let me take you to the Palm Sunday event that is today celebrated in the Christian Church.

The four canonical Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, each record the occasion of Jesus entering Jerusalem, but each has its own interpretation of the event. The Gospels, written four to six decades after the event, arose in different communities at different times and reflect the historical contexts of their communities, each community with special situations, challenges and interests as well as the perspective of the authors.

When I took English Bible at Hope College, we used a harmony of the Gospels – parallel readings of the four Gospels in columns down the page. That was the result of a scholarly process that forced each Gospel with its unique angle into one consistent story. We've learned after serious scholarly research of the Gospels that in so doing we missed the respective nuances of the story as it was composed by various writers in various situations and historical contexts.

This morning I want to focus on the accounts of John and Luke because it is my judgment that in those two portraits we see the entry into Jerusalem in the best perspective from which to understand the whole week culminating in Jesus' crucifixion.

First, John – the only account mentioning palm branches – a significant detail because the palm branch was a sign of nationalistic fervor.

What is going on with the crowd and its palm branches? According to John's picture, this is a crowd filled not so much with religious fervor as with rising nationalistic zeal. As I mentioned, only John speaks of palm branches and that is significant. Palm branches had a nationalistic association. Palms were evocative of Maccabean nationalism. As a symbol of nationalism, the palm occurred on the coins of the Second Revolt (132-135 C.E.). When Judas Maccabeus rededicated the temple altar after the Syrians had profaned it (164 B.C.E.), the Jews brought palms to the temple. When Simon Maccabeus conquered the Jerusalem citadel (142 B.C.E.), the Jews took possession of it carrying palm fronds. In the Testament of *Naphtali V4*, the fronds are given to Levi as a symbol of power over all Israel.

In sum, John's use of palms would seem to give to the whole scene a political overtone: Jesus being welcomed as a national liberator.

Further, the words “God bless the King of Israel,” which John has the crowd chant are not found in Psalm 118:26 from which the words, “Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord!” are taken.

Once before in John’s gospel (6:14-15), after Jesus fed the multitude, he realized the crowd wanted to make him king and he withdrew from them.

There is little doubt that the scene John paints is intended to indicate what was going on with the crowd. They were hoping that in Jesus they had found a national liberator and they hoped that this one now entering Jerusalem was about to declare himself the King of Israel.

But this was precisely not what Jesus was intending. Now he must do something to set them straight. What does he do?

He seeks to dispel the crowd’s misunderstanding through a prophetic action – an action even the disciples did not understand until after his death and resurrection. The action: Jesus sat on a colt, thereby seeking to call to mind the words of Zephaniah and Zechariah.

In Zechariah and Zephaniah it is the king who comes, but it is a different kind of king. Listen to the Zechariah citation:

See, your king is coming mounted on an ass’s colt.

If we go to that context in Zechariah, we find it is a call to Jerusalem to rejoice because its king is coming, coming mounted on an ass’s foal, to banish chariots from Ephraim and war horses from Jerusalem; the warrior’s bow shall be banished. The prophet’s word continues:
He shall speak peaceably to every nation, and his rule shall extend from sea to sea, from the river to the ends of the earth.

“Yes, Jerusalem,” Jesus seems to be saying by mounting the ass’s colt, “I am your king coming to you, but a different kind of king than you expect or desire.”

Similarly, in Zephaniah we have,

Fear not, O Zion,...the Lord your God is in your midst, like a warrior to keep you safe; he will rejoice over you and be glad; he will show you his love once more...

In that same context the prophet cries,

...be glad, rejoice with all your heart, daughter of Jerusalem...the Lord is among you as King, O Israel...

Jesus' mounting the colt was a prophetic action, according to John. After the death and resurrection, John writes, we understood what that action was trying to say. Jesus realized that the crowd had misinterpreted the Lazarus miracle just as the crowd had misunderstood the multiplication of loaves and fishes in John 6. The raising of Lazarus was a sign that God the giver of life was visiting His people in Jesus. They should not be proclaiming him as an earthly king, but as the manifestation of the Lord their God who has come into their midst, the God of Zechariah who would bring peace to the whole world.

We find this focus on peace for the world even more pronounced in Luke's Gospel. Remember the angel's song with which Luke portrays the birth of Jesus – "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace..."

Now as Jesus approaches Jerusalem we have him arrive at the destination intended in chapter 9:51, where Luke writes, "...he set his face to go to Jerusalem," and the so-called "journey section" of the Gospel culminates with Jesus overlooking the city from the Mount of Olives and weeping over it – weeping because in its imminent rejection of him it could only look forward to total devastation. I find this a most moving scene and it could be spoken time and again over the course of the human story – missing the moment, missing the possibility to avoid disaster, missing the visitation of God and the things that make for peace – human blindness, human stubbornness, human pride, anger, arrogance and cussedness in the service of nationalism, obsession with power and domination, refusing the way of peace which demands humility and willingness to change, to repent, to acknowledge one has been wrong...

Two portraits of Jesus on the occasion of his entry into Jerusalem, each being very clear about the intention of this one and the challenge he brought to his own people and his world. Reflect with me for a few moments about those two portraits of Jesus as he moves toward the climax of his life's mission.

The Gospels – not biography, but there is biographical data; not history, although the Gospels do deal with real historical time and place. Literally "Gospel" means good news – it is a report, a perspectus, an interpretation of historical events. In the case of our Gospels they are portraits of the founder and founding events of the Christian religion, the Christian faith tradition. And what we reflect on today – the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem – no doubt has an historical core. Jesus did indeed come to Jerusalem, the center of his peoples' religious life and their total self-understanding as a people, a people of God, of Yahweh.

But did it happen as either John or Luke told the story? Probably not. Out of whatever happened a story was told as part of a larger story and a portrait was painted as part of a larger painting to reflect the impact of his life. This is what was experienced in the life of Jesus.

A scholar who has worked intensively on the birth of Christianity and the Historical Jesus, John Dominic Crossan, makes what was for me a most helpful distinction between “History Remembered” and “Prophecy Historicized.”

History remembered is a recounting of events as they were experienced, as they occurred. There is no such thing as an absolutely accurate recounting of historical events – point of view, angle of vision, memory all force us to speak of a relatively accurate recounting. Until the relatively recent past (during two or three decades of biblical studies), I had taken the Gospels as history remembered – but then I came to see them as prophecy historicized – meaning the Passion Narrative of the Gospels, the story that begins on Palm Sunday and moves through Easter Sunday, is created out of the sacred text of the Jews – what we traditionally call the Old Testament, the sacred text of Jesus and his contemporaries, as well as ongoing Jewish faith.

I cannot begin to document that here – it is a study in its own right. I simply say that it is most remarkable that the events beginning with Jesus’ arrival at Jerusalem and unfolding through crucifixion and resurrection, are woven together out of Old Testament citations.

And how were these citations selected? There was selection and I suggest the selection was made in order to create a portrait of the one whose life, ministry and message were being set forth as the way, the truth and the life.

The concrete life, ministry and teaching of Jesus as experienced by those who became the Jesus Movement or the early Christian Church was told in terms of the story the gospel writer told but the citations were chosen because they reflected the way Jesus was experienced.

I go into this not to call in question the respective accounts of Palm Sunday; I do it to transcend questions about whether it all happened, which account is the most accurate, etc. I do it to get to the portrait itself because the portrait reflects the impression Jesus made, how he was heard and understood – the Gospel as presentation of the Good News that came to expression in the life and ministry of Jesus, the details of whose life are lost in the cloudy fog of the past never to be totally recovered.

Think with me about the portrait of Jesus as Luke and John narrate the story of Palm Sunday. And what are the contours of the message embodied in the historical life of this one coming of full expression at this critical juncture of his life?

Let me suggest the following – certainly not a complete description but a dimension I find both inspiring and challenging for our world today – Jesus as an embodiment of humility and love expressed in non-violent resistance. We see it in the refusal to play to the nationalistic fervor of his contemporaries.

This we see particularly in John as he tells the story: the crowd with its palm branches, symbolic of the Maccabean revolts of the second century before the Common Era – nationalism – my nation right or wrong, the lust for power and domination, the desire to be # 1, lie just beneath the surface for most of us most of the time. There were the zealots of the time of Jesus, those who were committed to throwing off the Roman yoke; those who eventually brought about the fatal collision with Roman power that left Jerusalem streets run red with the blood of the slain and the city a heap of ruins.

Zealotry among an oppressed people is understandable and ultimately fatal. But zealotry is not restricted to dominated peoples; it is present as well in the nationalistic rhetoric of our own administration and shamefully of many among the religious right who even now advocate military action against Iran just as, tragically, we have engaged in the pre-emptive war with Iraq. No dove for sure, Colin Powell warned before that fateful attack, the Pottery Barn analogy “if you break it you own it.” Having created the tragic chaos in Iraq we live with the consequences and still there are political and religious voices that would have us begin anew in Iran.

The imperial mindset entails endless war. That is simply the way it is. Luke wrote after the destruction of Jerusalem: Jesus’ prophecy was most likely never uttered on the Mount of Olives before he entered Jerusalem but Luke was quite right in attributing those words to him because his whole life and ministry was an effort to short-circuit the nationalistic passion that assumed it was possible means of force and military/guerilla action to find freedom and peace.

This is what the portrait of John tells us. He sought to put out the nationalistic passion of the crowd whose palm branches signaled their desire for the use of force to overthrow the oppressor, for a leader who would spark a revolt to overthrow the imperial domination.

In the words of Luke’s Jesus, “If you...had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes....”

Was Jesus simply a weakling, fearful, cowering before the powers that be – religious, social, cultural and political, suggesting one should simply submit to unjust structures and violent oppression? Not at all; Jesus was no advocate of the status quo. It was not the human desire for freedom, justice and humane existence that he called in question. It was rather that there is only one way to peace, justice and community – it is through non-violent resistance from a posture of humility and strength.

We have seen instances of such non-violent resistance that have overcome overwhelming odds: Ghandi – Martin Luther King Jr. –And that may be too

little, too rare, to convince one. Yet there is that in the human consciousness that is moved at such action and spirit.

When I think, “But it can’t work on the global scale” then I realize that our present course is what does not work.

A military solution is not a solution – it is a shorter or longer term stop-gap measure that will finally degenerate again into violence and war.

Whether with individuals or nations, only love transforms and compassion heals and creates the possibility for peace.

It is time such a claim ceases to be mere religious cliché and pulpit talk. If we live by empirical evidence that evidence lies in all the tragedy, violence, death and devastation of the entire human story. We should be able to see in the overwhelming evidence of the historical record that the human species has developed to such a point and the present human potential to destroy the human emergent world is so evident that we can no longer live by the clan and tribal ways of fear, isolation, national sovereignty and imperial dominion.

War is insane.

War is no longer an option.

Our thinking must change!

That has been true of me; my thinking that is my understanding of God and the nature of God’s action in the world has changed dramatically when first humankind lived under the threat of nuclear annihilation, I was not afraid because my understanding of God was that of the Sovereign Lord of History, the Lord God Almighty. The End was in God’s hands. But this was a sovereign God external to the creation, ruling and, on occasion, intervening.

But God has become for me much more the Sacred Mystery, the Creative Center of Being who rules through the lure of love or not at all. Love persuades; love does not coerce. The human creature in the image of God can resist the lure of love and the consequences may well be the end of the human emergent world.

War is no longer an option. Our thinking must change - change or we will destroy our world as surely as Jerusalem was destroyed in awful violence. And, if we stave off total devastation, we will nevertheless live in fear of destruction in the meantime.

Jesus called his world to repent. In Greek *metanoia* is composed of two parts: *meta*, “to change,” *nois* from *nous*, “mind.” Jesus’ message was: “Change your mind!”

Our thinking needs to change. And we need to experience a change of heart. I'm not sure which one must occur first. Maybe our thinking won't change without a significant emotional experience. And such an emotional catharsis is the potential of Holy Week for those for whom the Way of Jesus is compelling.

As I reflect on my own spiritual journey, my thinking has changed dramatically while at the same time I have experienced a significant emotional transformation in my experience of following Jesus and if, as I believe, Jesus was a human embodiment of God, of the Creative Mystery of Being, then I can say it is only in my latter years that I have experienced love for God. For me there has been a transformation of my thinking and my experience of God and that has come about through a fresh vision of Jesus in his full humanity in the portrait I see painted in the Gospels.

Studies in research of the Historical Jesus have been important in putting Jesus in his historical context and, in the portraits painted of him in the Gospels, I have seen the amazing life of this one whose life was marked by grace, who reflected God's unconditional love and who spoke truth to power, confronting the oppressive structures of established political and religious authority – for which he was crucified.

While this fresh portrait of Jesus was making its impact on me, changing my thinking, I encountered two stories of persons whose heroic lives were the consequence of the Way of Jesus as I was coming to understand it.

While studying in the Netherlands, trying to find a new theological understanding since my little system had groaned and cracked in the midst of my seven years of pastoral experience, I was struggling with trying to translate and understand contemporary Dutch and German theology. One day I picked up a little paperback, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. It was my spiritual sustenance during those four years in Europe.

In Bonhoeffer I found a contemporary disciple of Jesus who risked his life and finally gave his life in his resistance to the Nazi horror that was raging in Europe. His life, his faith, his courage so impressed me.

At some point I realized what I felt for Bonhoeffer was more gripping than what I felt for Jesus. But my understanding of Jesus was changing the more I saw him fully human in his own historical context. I grew up with Jesus, Son of God, second person of the Trinity, whose atoning death was my only hope of salvation but that divine Saviour figure never really got to me in the same sense I was experiencing the life of Bonhoeffer. Finally I brought all this to expression. It was actually a Palm Sunday sermon, April 15, 1984. In that sermon I said,

Jesus has no doubt been the greatest inspirer of human faith and life in the whole of human history. I have been reflecting on why his life has not been more

powerful for me. I think I understand why Bonhoeffer moved me more – or so it seems. I think it is because Bonhoeffer was of our time. He seems more human – more one of us. He took on Hitler – not the Jewish High Priest or the Roman Emperor. He was a man – just a man. But Jesus was something else.

The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that the Church in her theological discussion has removed Jesus – the real, historical, human figure – from me. Yet the more I penetrate through the theological haze surrounding him, the more I see him for what he was. The more overwhelmed I am at the grandeur of his life, the more I am moved by his faith and commitment, the more I love him and want to be like him. It is a paradox; the more I see him in his full humanity, the more I am inclined to bow in worship before him.

I concluded the sermon inviting the congregation to think about Jesus in his full humanity, confronting non-violently the domination system of his day.

Maybe in our contemplating of his behavior in these days we will see the wonder of his life. Maybe we will finally break out with the exclamation, “Jesus, you are really something!”

If that happens, we will be changed; we will die and be born again.

If the events of this week – the magnificence of Jesus’ authentic human life, the humility that is strength, the obedience that is freedom, the self-renunciation that is the highest expression of selfhood – ever penetrate to the core of our being, then we will bow in adoring worship before him whom God has highly exalted.

“Adoring worship” was probably not the strongest way to conclude but in the sermon I had cited that powerful solo sung by Mary Magdalene in the rock opera *Jesus Christ, Super Star*, who sings so movingly, “I don’t know how to love him.”

My second story came not long after Bonhoeffer triggered fresh emotional apprehension of Jesus. I was given a book by Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, the story of a village in the French Alps.

It is a story of how this mountain village, Le Chambon, defied the orders of the German Gestapo and the collaborating French Vichy government under Nazi domination during the Second World War, by sheltering refugees of all sorts, but the majority of whom were Jews. It is a gripping, moving, inspiring narrative whose center is a French Reformed pastor, Andre Trocmé.

In his youth Trocmé had experienced the gruesome horror of World War I. He encountered an occupying German soldier and learned this soldier went about his duties as a telegrapher unarmed because he refused to kill – He had had a conversion experience and he believed as a follower of Jesus, he could not do

harm to another – he could not kill another human being. The German soldier said to him, “Christ taught us to love our enemies.”

This encounter so deeply impacted Trocmé that for the rest of his life he lived by the imperative to do no harm to another. Trocme eventually studied theology at the University of Paris and became a French Reformed pastor. One evening in a men’s group, Trocme was discussing a book that claimed Jesus was a myth created by St. Paul. Trocmé refuted the book’s claim but found himself asking the question:

If Jesus really walked upon this earth, why do we keep treating him as if he were a disembodied, impossibly idealistic ethical theory? If he was a real man, then the Sermon on the Mount was made for people on this earth; and if he existed, God has shown us in flesh and blood what goodness is for flesh-and-blood people.
(p. 68)

The rest of his life was a living out of the Sermon on the Mount. The events of the village of Le Chambon during the German occupation of France during World War II, the story as told by Hallie, is wonderfully moving and inspiring.

I suspect what was so powerful for me was the connection between Trocmé’s total living out of the Sermon on the Mount as the catalyst for the magnificent compassion and love that was embodied in the village as it became a city of refuge.

And I had not known what to do with the Sermon on the Mount in my preaching.

I could not go along with certain fundamentalist claims that it represented the ethic for the kingdom age when Jesus returned and ruled on earth. But of what practical good was it in a winner-take-all world such as ours – competitive, aggressive, where nice guys come in last?

And so I seldom selected my sermon texts from those passages that scholars who study the New Testament text actually are inclined to attribute to Jesus when they withhold such accreditation to much else recorded in the gospels.

But I was being changed:

Bonhoeffer’s heroic engagement with the Nazi darkness; Le Chambon saving hundreds of lives at their own peril; my own wrestling with the Gospel.

And I am still being changed, still wondering, questioning, trying to understand the Way of Jesus in the present historical moment.

That is a bit of my journey – my thinking has changed: Jesus, second person of the Trinity to Jesus, the embodiment of God in a fully human being, the embodiment of humility, compassion, grace and love who through non-violent resistance speaks truth to power in order to re-order human society in the ways of peace and justice.

And I have been emotionally gripped – I love Jesus. I believe he is the way, the truth and the life and I do believe his way is the only hope for the world.

And my nation is a world empire and empires can only perpetuate their imperial dominance through military might, intimidation and the arrogance of power. War is insane, but we are still on a war strategy. We have unlimited power but we have become too civilized to use it and what we cannot defeat by our power is the violence of the powerless – the terrorist who will blow him or herself up because of ideology or religious faith or because there is nothing to lose.

There was a moment when the Berlin Wall fell and we were without question the one world super power, that we might have had an opportunity for a new creation. In the world of power politics you dare not let down your guard unless the biggest power on earth takes the lead.

And I wonder if following 911 we had responded differently – if we had pursued the murderers as they should have been pursued by police action, but if we had called an International Conference of Nations rather than naming an Axis of Evil– hearing the complaints of the oppressed, the background of the anger of the terrorists, the hopes and fears of the powerless and the voiceless – What if we, the world's one super power, had voluntarily put away our nuclear arms leading the nations to disarmament.

Hopeless idealism? Perhaps. What's the alternative? Don't we have it? Don't we see the carnage daily on our TV? And are we not really in a more dangerous world today than on 9/12?

I wonder if we could transcend partisan politics, if we could gather as concerned human beings we couldn't agree that the present policy is not working. A radical new approach is called for.

What if we got a conversation going with Islam, with the Palestinians, with Israel, with China, with Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Somalia, with whoever would come to the table and we did it without the threat of our power, militarily, economically –

What if as a so-called Christian nation we really took seriously the way of Jesus as the way we would be what if...?

On this Palm Sunday I propose the above which, I suspect, makes me a fool for Christ, but I also suspect if someone would arise on the national scene who would

dare to propose such, he or she might be elected President in a landslide because, deep down, we know...

Jesus was right.

Would that he would not have died in vain.

References:

Philip Hallie. *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of LeChambon and How Goodness Happened There*. Harper Perennial; Reprint edition, 1994.