

Hespeler, 14 April, 2019 © Scott McAndless – Palm Sunday
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-40, Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11

Today is Palm Sunday – the day when the church celebrates the triumphal entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem. Every Christian knows that. Every year we read the story of that day. If you follow the lectionary (as we are doing this year) one year you read the account in the Gospel of Matthew, the next year in Mark and the next year in Luke. So I was very eager this year to turn to Luke’s account of the story of that day. What new insight would I find into the palms and that meaningful entry? So I read the passage... and I honestly could not believe what I saw.

I read it through once and I just thought that I missed them, so I read it again. Nope, still weren’t there. What is missing in Luke’s story? There are no palms and no triumphal entry in the Gospel of Luke. I went and looked it up on Wikipedia and Wikipedia assured me that, yes, that they were there, but I couldn’t find them. I thought it might be a translation error. I actually went and got out my Greek text of the New Testament and looked in there. But there are no palms in the original Greek text and not in any English translation that I could find. The Gospel of Luke’s story of the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday contains neither palms nor entry.

Are you shocked? I was. I’ll bet you didn’t even notice when we read it. I’ve been reading and preaching on this passage for years and I never noticed it before. Luke states that the disciples lay their garments on the ground as Jesus went past, but there is not a single word about waving greenery either in people’s hands or on the ground. What’s more, while Luke does describe Jesus’ approach to the city from the Mount of Olives, his account of the event ends while Jesus is still outside the walls.

So what am I saying here? That we should gather up all of the palms that the kids were waving around this morning and throw them away? Am I suggesting that we did something wrong this morning by re-enacting it as we did? No, not at all. The mere fact that Luke doesn’t mention palm leaves doesn’t mean that there weren’t any there. And just because Luke cuts off the account before Jesus arrives in the city doesn’t mean that he didn’t make a triumphal entry. Of course he did. In fact, there is evidence that Luke knew that palms were part of the story, they were in his source material. But that leaves us with another question, doesn’t it? If Luke knew that people had them there, why *didn’t* he mention them?

Well, consider this: what if Luke knew what he was doing? Have you ever wondered about why the



palms were there in the first place? Why is it that a crowd of people who were excited about the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem just spontaneously all went and broke down branches and started waving them around and throwing them on the road? I have seen a lot of people in crowds or spontaneous demonstrations. I have seen people do a lot of things in those situations and use a lot of props, but I have never seen anybody cutting down branches to use as a part of a demonstration. So, if the people were doing that particular thing on that particular occasion, they must have had a reason. The palms must have meant something to them. And indeed they did!

I'm going to have to give you just a little bit of history here to explain. As you know, in Jesus' time Judea and Galilee were under Roman control. But before the Romans had come along and conquered the region, Judea had actually been an independent kingdom that was ruled over by a Jewish dynasty known as the Hasmoneans. When the Romans took over they ended the Hasmonean dynasty and put their own puppet king in charge of the region, a guy that you might have heard of named King Herod the Great. Later some parts of the region, such as Galilee, passed on to King Herod's sons while Rome took on direct rule of other parts, such as Judea.

Okay, what does that have to do with people waving around palm branches on Palm Sunday? Everything. What if I were to tell you that palm branches were a symbol of the Hasmonean dynasty? That's right, thousands of ancient Hasmonean coins have been found marked with the symbol of crossed palm branches. Now do you think that it was just a coincidence that the people cut down palm branches on that day?

And think about what all of this would have looked like, especially to the Romans. It is only days before the great feast of Passover, the day when the people of Israel celebrate the time when their God freed them from being slaves to a great empire and a large procession of people approach the city of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives where everyone could see them waving the symbols of the very kings that the Romans displaced when they took over and hailing somebody in their midst, somebody riding on the back of a donkey, as a king.

I'll tell you what it looked like. It looked like sedition. It looked like open revolt. Is it any wonder that, within a matter of days, the guy who had been riding on that donkey had been arrested and nailed to a cross?

The people waving palm branches was roughly the equivalent of people today wearing orange to an NDP or blue to a Conservative or red to a Liberal rally, except, of course, that those parties are all legal in Canada. The Hasmonean party, if you can call it that, was not legal.

So, having learned all of that, the mystery of Luke's story of a palm free Palm Sunday is an even bigger mystery to me. Why did Luke leave out the palms when all of the other gospel writers mention them? I'm convinced it

must have been a deliberate decision. Is it possible that Luke was concerned about the idea that Jesus and the people with him might have indeed been making a political statement that day?

I think I know exactly how Luke felt. I too am feeling pretty cautious about political statements these days. Can I be candid here? I'm a bit worried about what the political environment in this country might look like over the coming months. We are heading towards a federal election as you know, and I fear that it will be one of the most divisive we have seen in recent times. The problem, in my mind, is not the parties or their policies (though I won't say I don't personally have some concerns about both); the problem is the context that we find ourselves in. We are living in a time when fewer and fewer Canadians get their news and information from reliable sources – a world where a totally made up meme posted on Facebook or Twitter is read by many more people than a well-sourced and researched article in a reputable newspaper.

I am worried that we are living in a country where increasing numbers of people are so entrenched into their positions that they immediately dismiss as fake anything that doesn't fit the narrative that they have already bought into. Please understand, I am not saying that it is only one party or one group that is doing this. I am seeing it happen on all sides and I have even caught myself doing it as well. I worry about where that will lead us. I'm not scared that the result will be this brand of government or that one. I'm worried that the road to that end will bring to light all kinds of hatred, racism and destructive rhetoric. I fear that we will all be brought lower as a result.

Now maybe I am wrong and it won't be like that. I hope I am. But it has certainly made me think a lot about how we as the church participate in the political discussion. I do not believe it is the place of the church in a democratic country to be political partisans. You will never hear me endorse a particular party or candidate in the church, though I will always vote as a citizen. Nor do I expect that we should all agree in the church on how to vote; it is a healthy sign that we don't.

But, when Jesus went to Jerusalem and the people responded to his coming by grabbing onto a symbol of a certain political idea – palm branches – did Jesus rebuke them? No, but clearly not because Jesus endorsed that particular political idea. He let them do it because he knew that they had deep aspirations and needs, they were grasping for some way to express those things and they gravitated towards the palm as a symbol. It was an imperfect expression of their real hopes. In many ways, the palm leaves are like the political symbols, memes and fake news stories that people cling to today. I don't think that we should blame people for being attached to such things, but at the same time I think we should recognize

that the issue is not the palm branches. The issue is the deeper drive that makes people grab onto those palm branches and wave them around.

So, in some ways, I think Luke had it right. He was right to leave the palms out of Palm Sunday because the political partisanship of the moment was not actually what mattered. What mattered was what was going on in the people's wounded hearts. That's what Jesus was responding to. And Jesus recognized that there was no denying that. That whole incident at the end of this morning's reading when the Pharisees come up to Jesus and tell him that he needs to shut down this dangerous political demonstration (and that is what it was), and Jesus responds by saying, **"I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out"** – basically saying that there is no way to shut this down because you can't silence the aspirations of the people – that is found only in the Gospel of Luke. And it represents a very important insight. Clearly Jesus is not interested in getting caught up in the dispute between the Roman Empire and the partisans of an old Jewish dynasty, but he is there for the people and he's not going to shut them down. He's going to meet them where they are.

And I think there is a model in that for the church in our present and somewhat difficult times. Yes, it is not the place of the church to get in the middle of partisan fights. But people are struggling. There are issues, often called hot button political issues, that are deeply affecting people's lives – issues like poverty, immigration, racism, sexism and general inequality. The church doesn't call these political issues; we call them justice issues, but to the outside world they often look like the same thing. And we can try to ignore those issues, but Jesus warns us that if we do try and shut those discussions down, we will fail. We try to ignore what the people are calling for and the stones will cry out in their place.

The church needs to speak out, to cry out for what is just and right. In a world where truth has become little more than whatever people have already decided to believe no matter what the evidence is, we need to put it all on the line for certain truths. In a world where it has become easy to demonize and scapegoat anyone who disagrees with you – to call them the enemy of the people – we need to be a community where reconciliation is possible, where we pray for our enemies and love them. In a world where people are constantly told to look out only for what is in it for them, we need to be a place where the first must be last and the servant of all.

Indeed, many of the things that most disturb me about our present political climate have their antidote in the church – or at least in the church as it is meant to be. I think we can lay down our palms – our partisan symbols – when we enter into the church community, but we have much that we could bring to the political discourse if we dare to speak up. It is our role and it greatly needed in the world today. I hope that the church steps up to that role in the days to come.