

Palm Sunday Reflection - Philippians 2: 5-11

Taking my cue from a blog I often read (Provoking the Gospel, Richard Swanson), I was drawn to the Philippians reading because it is often the reading that gets overlooked, or pushed to the side on this Sunday of many readings. With everything upside down, so to speak, why not focus on the reading that often gets overlooked.

What we have here is one of the earliest recorded hymns in the Christian church. Sound theology often was (and from time to time still is) set to music so to enable people to remember and know it. What springs more easily to mind for you - the first verse of Amazing Grace or the Venite?

Paul is speaking into a culture that understood power in terms of human rulers and the gods (Greek & Roman) - those who used their power for their own purposes and pleasure. Rulers and leaders that took advantage of their ability to morph into whatever they wanted to be, without care of how it might impact the other, especially the powerless.

Into this culture and understanding, Paul writes:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,*

*but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness. (v. 5-7)*

This is NOT what the gods do. They do not take the form of a slave. They do not become like the powerless. In other words, this God is different. Very different.

Even Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem on this day of Hosanna's was not quite like other rulers. Yes, he rode in to loud shouts of praise, to the waving of palm branches and the bowing of those who worshipped him. But he rode in on a donkey, not a stately stallion. Even in his acceptance of his divinity and rule, he mocked the ways of this world, accepted the humility of his chosen path.

This year, as we refrain from gathering, as we cannot participate in our own small but beloved parade from hall to church waving our branches and singing, 'All glory, laud and honour', I believe we are invited into a unique opportunity in our faith journey. All around Jesus on this day were those shouts of acclamation, the festive feelings, the joy and the song. But consider what was in his heart.

Jesus knew (and at this point it is likely he was the only one who truly knew) what the end of the week would bring. He knew his death was imminent. And he knew it would not be an easy

death. As I consider this, I picture, in a way, this still and silent centre in the midst of all those Hosanna's. It does not take away from them, but it journeys along with them.

Perhaps this year, as we are invited to let the same mind as Christ Jesus be in us, we might dwell in that still, silent, knowing centre.

It is a truth we do not like and often find many ways to turn away from. That truth being that God more often than not brings life through the transformative process of death. That resurrection (redemption, healing, restoration) happens after death has occurred.

The teaching here is that Jesus choose to walk towards his own death knowingly, willingly, obediently. This is a hard teaching

*And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (v. 7,8)*

This Holy Week will be like no other for many if not all of us. And if we can look beyond our very real grief at not being able to gather and to worship as we usually do, we will see a profound invitation.

God did not build the cross. Human hands did that. God did not condemn Jesus to death. Human hearts did that. But God did use the cross - a cruel instrument of death and corrupted human power - to undermine evil and death, to bring about the impossible - resurrected life.

God did not create the pandemic. God does not choose who will get sick, who will die. God will, however, use what is unfolding for the purposes of life and resurrection. And God will do that through our action, and to be frank, through our inaction.

(I cannot help but see resurrection when I see pictures of clear skies in cities usually plagued by smog, when I see waterways clear that were always murky, when I hear birdsong before I hear cars.)

Knowing that resurrection is coming next Sunday does not make the journey this week any easier. Death is death. For those of us who have particular griefs lingering deep in our hearts the pain is very real. The tears need to be shed, the pain felt.

But as people of faith, we choose, very purposely and intentionally not remain there.

We hold onto the hope, however fragile it may be, that those who have died are now whole and hearty in the new life in Christ.

And I cannot help but wonder, as many people are, how this imposed pause from our frenetic lifestyles, consumer driven economy that gives us little rest, from our supposed needs that pollute our planet - how all of this will change our way of living, of being and of loving. I cannot help but wonder (and hope) at what resurrected life we are being invited into.

Jesus will die this week. We will, in our imaginations journey with him to the cross. We will, perhaps, experience that journey more acutely because of own losses and the suffering of our world right now. But we will make that journey knowing how the story ends, so that we can sing with millions of sisters and brothers this ancient hymn,

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (v.9-11)*

Amen.