

The West gate or the East gate?

*Blessed is the who comes in the name of the LORD.
From the house of the LORD we bless you. Psalm 118: 26*

I tend to find the Sunday where we remember Jesus' entry to Jerusalem rather confusing. It is clearly part of a narrative that begins before this and it certainly is part of the narrative that follows – that we call Holy Week. It comes right after Jesus brings Lazarus back to life and the plot to then kill Jesus, and it comes before the Last Supper (which in John is quite different to the other Gospels) and the Judgement, Crucifixion and Resurrection. A time of contrasts, of surprises, of contradictions. It is a time that raises so many questions, and lots of them are uncomfortable, because we are confronted with our own brokenness and our own difficulties. What is going on then?

It would seem all joy and happiness, and shouts, and psalm singing. So much so that it is often described as a "Triumphal" entry, and that is a concept I find hard, because we know that won't last too long. I wonder if Jesus would have described this as triumphant, rather a way of fulfilling his calling: *for this I have come*. But again, in contrast to Roman processions which were a show of violence, and power, Jesus' procession was one of celebration and song and dance. And this is something no Empire of any place or any time will ever understand. So once again, the question What is going on then?

Read the passage from John slowly, taking in every detail, and you will come across how different it is from the readings of the other Gospels, and at the same time sharing a few elements.

The most important is that it is set in the context of the Jewish festivity of Passover. The celebration of the liberation of slavery in Egypt, and the beginning of the Exodus. A time where the city fills to bursting point, as many people as possible go to the Temple. Interesting to connect with the birth of Jesus, where due to the Census, the town of Bethlehem too was filled to bursting with no room in the inn. This time is the end of the long journey for many people who have journeyed to Jerusalem for the Passover, and this climb to the city is the last effort for a group of tired walkers, that is why those people who are already there encourage them singing the words of the Psalm – as we read above. It's a sort of "*Come on, you are nearly there, not much more to go*".

Another thing to bear in mind is that in John, Jesus mounts the donkey (vs 14), probably a license of the author to fit in to the words of the words of Zechariah. And this is crucial to the narrative. The donkey is a reminder that the power that is coming in Jesus is not a military-political-imperial power. While Herod would enter Jerusalem through the West Gate on a horse and the legions – he would not be seen dead sitting on a humble donkey. Jesus, on the other hand, enters through the East Gate, on the donkey, and people singing and dancing. The power seen in Jesus is so very different from the human power as expressed in the power to crucify, rather it is the power coming from God. Jesus chooses a different way – and again let us go back to the beginning of his public ministry when he faces the temptations in the desert. What happens then is related to what happens here. Jesus is the expression of the very different power – God's power expressed in a servant. And the Church, today, has do choose what gate it will enter by...

In the midst of all this, John tells us in verse 16 that the disciples "don't understand", it will only be later after Jesus' resurrection will they be able to connect the dots. So, what is going on then? Well, according to the way this passage finishes, it would seem that the people are attracted by the one who raised Lazarus, which in the Gospel of John has just happened in the previous chapter, and of course that would explain the acclamation; but what happens when you read chapter 11, verses 45-54? Those who represent the human power of excess when they come face to face with life, take the decision that Jesus must be executed – "*If we let him go on like*

this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.” (vs 48). So here we are given an insight into what is going through the mind of the powerful.

Jesus clearly represents the alternative that God is offering us – and as I mentioned in last week’s Reflection, there will be a consequence to that alternative. The fear of losing power and all that comes with power, is what makes the scales come down on one side – the side of death, over the side of life.

And sadly, we see this same situation replicated in the world today. Any challenge to human power based on death not life, will be persecuted and they will try to eradicate it. Last week I referred to our Reformed tradition as being that of the Covenant, one which affirms that if Jesus is Lord, all other claims to lordship are idolatrous – neither the Market, political systems, race, or gender have the right to lord over others, because only Jesus is Lord.

Back in 2004, when I was member of the Executive Committee of what then was the World Communion of Reformed Churches, at the General Council in Accra -Ghana, the churches gathered there, approved what has since then been known as **The Accra Confession** (AC). One of the most important documents within the Reformed Churches for these times (<http://wrc.ch/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/AccraConfession-Introduction.pdf>). Let me share a few short paragraphs from this Confession:

*“Speaking from our Reformed tradition and having read the signs of the times, the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches affirms that global economic justice **is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians.** We believe that the **integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act** in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization and therefore, we confess before God and one another. (AC para 16)”*

*“Therefore, we reject the culture of rampant consumerism and the competitive **greed and selfishness** of the neoliberal global market system or any other system which claims there is no alternative. (AC para 21)”*

Sharing these two paragraphs with you (highlights are mine), resonate some of the Bible readings we have Reflected on during this time of Lent, and I cannot be surprised that Jesus was condemned to death by the powers who seek human glorification. And it is true, sometimes we don’t understand what is going on, but in faith of being people of the Covenant, we trust God’s ways as before and above human ways, and we seek to be faithful to our calling of Walking the Way of Jesus, admitting that faithfulness to that way also has its risks, and its consequences.

*“By confessing our faith together, **we covenant in obedience to God’s will as an act of faithfulness in mutual solidarity and in accountable relationships.** This binds us together to work for justice in the economy and the earth both in our common global context as well as our various regional and local settings. (AC para 37)”* – this is the journey we have embarked on, following Jesus who leads the way, and we walk not alone; God has promised to be with us until the end of time. Jesus knew this to be true, that is why he was able to enter Jerusalem, but choosing the East Gate. He knew that it was going to get really, really tough. But the final word is not that of the human powers, as we will read about next week (even when these human powers still haven’t learnt that lesson). Amen

Collect for this Sunday of Lent:

Humble Lord, while people clamoured for a warrior-king, the colt revealed your servanthood: as you face the way of tears, the tearing of the veil, take us from the baying mob to place our faith in you, Jesus Christ, our victim and our saviour. Amen (Prayers for an Inclusive Church)

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