

Being God's Children

Matthew 5:1-9

Crossroads Christian Church

Mark 11:1-11

Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015 Beatitudes

Pax Romana. The Peace of Rome. The Romans had built a great empire, encircling the Mediterranean Sea and reaching northward through Europe, even up to England. They conquered by having an efficient fighting machine—a well-disciplined, well-trained, well equipped army that up to Jesus' time, had defeated all comers. Once they conquered a land, they brought stability, an enforced peace. As with the Borg, resistance was futile. Pax Romana was a selling point for them, and they were very proud of it. They built their famous roads, linking all their subject lands together, which encouraged trade and economic growth. Of course, the same roads were also good for quick movement of troops. The Peace of Rome, enforced at the point of a spear.

Each year, near the time of the Passover, the Roman governors marched troops to Jerusalem from other outposts. They came to keep the Pax Romana, and to send a message. You don't mess with Rome. They entered Jerusalem in a giant parade, marching to the beat, marching in utter precision, marching with the sun glinting on their helmets, on their shields, on their spears. It was an impressive display, and it would cause all but the nuttiest of fanatics to think twice before trying anything.

The Romans marched in through the front door with this big, mighty parade to remind the subjugated city, don't try anything if you know what's good for you.

And guess who came in the back door? A teacher who had stirred things up in an outlying province. A country boy with a few rag-tag followers. People may have wondered. Is he mocking the Romans, with this little processional march into the city? Is he making fun of Caesar and all his legions? If he is, he won't last very long.

Jesus came into town knowing what to expect. He knew that many people saw him as having the potential to lead a revolution, to spark a rebellion, and that they might take matters into their own hands. He knew of the opposition of the political and religious leaders. For good or for bad, he would be a focus of attention. The gospels show us that Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem was carefully planned and orchestrated. It didn't just happen. Jesus wanted people to know just who he was and what he was doing. He was the Messiah. He had come to save the people. But he wasn't going to save them by leading a rebellion. He was coming as the Prince of Peace.

This wasn't a spontaneous demonstration. It didn't just happen. Mark spends almost as much time talking about how Jesus got the donkey as he does describing Jesus riding the donkey through the crowds. They are on the Mount of Olives, above and just to the east of Jerusalem. He sends the disciples into a neighboring village and tells them to find a specific donkey—a young one, that no one has ridden before. If someone asks, they are to

say that the Master has need of it. All this was to help people remember a verse from the prophet Zechariah 9:9.

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion.

Sing aloud, Daughter Jerusalem.

Look, your king will come to you.

He is righteous and victorious.

He is humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt, the offspring of a donkey.”

So Jesus rode a donkey. The custom was that a conquering king or general would enter a city on a warhorse, or on a chariot. A king who came in peace would ride on a donkey. “Hosanna!” the crowds cried, as they waved their palm branches in tribute. It was a cry one would make to God. It meant “O save us!” They shouted “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” And so he came, the center of attention, into the city which would later capture him, torture him, kill him, and cast him aside—but also the city which would witness his glorious resurrection. So he had his own parade, and said just what he needed to say.

He came in peace. He came to bring peace. He came so that the peace of God could challenge the Peace of Rome.

Over the course of Lent, Jesus has invited us to be happy; to be blessed. We are to be blessed by being aware of our own spiritual poverty; by acknowledging our grief; by living in unassuming gentleness; by desiring God’s righteousness; by being merciful; by being pure-hearted. All these build upon one another. As we live like that, we are given the grace and strength to become peacemakers.

Peace—Shalom in Hebrew, Eirene in Greek—means more than the absence of war and conflict. It means becoming healed; becoming made whole. Peacemakers are those who bring health and wholeness to broken lives; to a broken world. Peacemakers bring reconciliation where there is division. Peacemakers work for justice in unjust situations. Peacemakers, according to Jesus, are children of God—and he should know, right? What does “children of God” mean? The Hebrew language is very concrete. Instead of saying suburb, for example, Hebrew says, literally, “daughter of the city.” A son or daughter is like the parent. A peacemaker is like God. The family resemblance is there because a peacemaker does God’s work. Colossians 1:20 tells us this about God’s work in Jesus Christ: “and he reconciled all things to himself through him— whether things on earth or in the heavens. He brought peace through the blood of his cross.”

Jim Forest, in *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*, says “the seventh rung—blessed are the peacemakers. Only after ascending the first six rungs of the ladder of the Beatitudes can we talk about the Beatitude of the Peacemaker, for only a person with a pure heart can help, in God’s mercy, to rebuild broken bridges and pull down wall, to help us recover our lost unity. The maker of peace must be a person who seeks nothing for himself, not even

recognition. Such a person does not even regard his actions as “good deeds.” They simply are the consequence of having been drawn more deeply into God’s love. Because of this, such a person cannot help but see others, even the most unpleasant and dangerous person, as a child of God, someone beloved by God, someone in the image of God even if the likeness is presently very damaged or completely lost....At the deepest level, the peacemaker is a person being used by God to help heal our relationship with God, for we get no closer to God than we get to our neighbor.”ⁱ (unquote)

These words of Jim Forests remind us again that peacemakers are God’s children, because they resemble God—they do God’s work of Shalom. They recognize all others as God’s children. But how do we live into that image of God? What are the settings in which we can act as peacemakers?

There’s a saying “If you want peace, work for justice.” Whatever we can do to bring justice, welfare and health to those in need is an important part of the peacemaking process. After the riots and looting in Ferguson, with store windows boarded up with plywood, artists came in and painted the plywood with scenes of peace; quotations from scripture; illustrations of different races of people working together. With a click of your computer mouse on the Hunger Site, you can help buy food for the world’s hungry—at no cost. You can use your vote as a way of selecting leaders and policies that will work for peace and justice. You can work for peace by the way you act in your family life, and in your neighborhood. By giving through such agencies as Week of Compassion, Church World Service, Heifer Project International, and Bread for the World, you help bring the possibilities of sustainable living to people in need. Working for a cleaner, healthier environment is working for peace with creation. We each can find ways of making a positive difference. We each can find ways to be peacemakers. Then, as we do, we can be God’s children.; Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

ⁱ Jim Forest, Ladder of the Beatitudes, Orbis, 1996.