

Appropriating Jerusalem
Palm Sunday, Year C
Luke 19: 28-48
28 March 2010

As a child I remember all the children in Rangiora being assembled in the park next to our house so that the Governor General Sir Bernard Ferguson could speak to us from a band rotunda. His red staff officers uniform and monocle are the only clear impressions left of that incident.

When dignitaries and very important people make an official first time visit to a city there is usually a rather more elaborate procedure to be followed. Prior notice is given of the visit, and the public are encouraged to line the approach route, with appropriate insignias of welcome. A dignified vehicle is provided on which the VIP can ride in the parade. Perhaps a band, and police or military escort may be provided. Usually the parade concludes with a welcome by civic dignitaries, a brief speech or two, and what is known as an appropriation ritual. This amounts to a symbolic action by which the distinguished visitor symbolically takes possession of the city, perhaps by being given the keys of the city, or in the case of the ancient world by sacrificing to the local Gods.

The arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem at first glance may seem similar to this parade procedure. The rapturous crowd scenes, and highly visual symbols of welcome were in evidence. But this was a spontaneous happening from below. Had the authorities known he was coming they might have made rather different reception arrangements. The very unlimousine like choice of a donkey to ride on was a symbolic declaration that invited the crowd to consider that here was a religious leader of a rather different calibre to the ones they were used to. The escort group too, are just a small group of Galileans, with not a uniform or an example of smart dressing to be seen.

But it is what takes place immediately after the parade, the bit we didn't hear about in the reading before our procession this morning that has elements of genuine novelty in it. Jesus laments over Jerusalem, he weeps over it, and then predicts its conquest and ruin. Then he enters the Temple and drives out the sellers of trinkets and animal adjuncts to sacrificial worship. This was a most unusual appropriation ritual.

In effect Jesus has claimed the Temple, temporarily at least, and has also claimed a spiritually purified role for this most important worship site. And he has anticipated, with great sorrow, the rejection that he believes is inevitable in Jerusalem. It has been said of this last phase of the ministry of Jesus, the Jerusalem mission, that it represents

God's last best offer to the human race, after the failure of the Galilean mission. But this initiative too is apparently in trouble even as it gets under way. So Jesus must have taken all the hosannas and apparent public approval with a pinch of salt. A mood of grim realism is evident, as this week of weeks gets under way.

Which helps to explain some otherwise puzzling features of the Lukan passion narrative. When Jesus is brought before the religious leaders of the people, and is under interrogation, isn't this his big chance to proclaim his message, and to win the co-operation of the people who might be able to provide vital help in making it all happen? Yet he is taciturn and ironic in his replies. He seems to have come to the conclusion that they have made their minds up already, and that keeping his dignity is the best outcome he can hope for. Somehow this pattern of rejection is all part and parcel of God's plan to find a way through human obtuseness and rejection.

The blame game that has gone on amongst Scripture scholars and theologians for a long time as to whether the Romans or the Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus misses the point. What has happened here is that a human being has redone, has recapitulated, has lived out well, human life as God always intended and desired human beings to do it. The story line that was messed up originally has now been put right, been put straight, in one representative human life. The plot has as it were been rewritten in an immaculate and arresting form in one human life, and this has consequences beyond the immediate entourage of those who spend time with Jesus.

For if the second Adam, the new man has turned up in human affairs, then this will have a knock on effect throughout human reality. Amongst other things it will invite a hostile reaction from whoever is in charge at that particular time and place. How else could things be when human affairs are shot through with a deep attraction to evil, and all the inevitable muddle and mendacity that follows when the people in charge are anxious, angry and controlling. It is not so much a question of what if the right people, better people, had been in charge. The outcome we know so well is inevitable, because a perfect life invites this kind of a response no matter what time and place it is lived out in, and no matter who is in the drivers seat. The stated reasons for getting rid of such a person would vary from one society to another, from one time to another – but the eliminate imperative would be the same.

What happens then when judicial murder is done to the one whom the apostles will refer to in their preaching as the pioneer of life, the author of life? There is within this second Adam, this Jesus of Nazareth, a freshness of being that corresponds to the reality that in him the life giving Spirit that we call God has taken up residence. Life as it is meant to be lived is lived out in this particular human being

because he is indwelt by that personal spiritual reality that made the worlds. Such a human life is vulnerable to all that the dishes out of pain and death can do to it. But when judicial murder and the second Adam come into collision the result is an overflowing of fresh new life that will confound the hopes of executioners.

If you have a life giving Spirit within you then nothing can keep you down for long. But Jesus won't just resume his former existence. He sets about, in the events of Holy Week, sharing this life giving Spirit with others in a variety of astounding ways. What was present at first in one human life he is now intent on widely distributing to, as it were, a new race of second Adams, and I suppose Eves. One of these innovative sharing mechanisms, transmission belts if you like, is the Eucharist we are celebrating now. I will be going into the whys and wherefores of all that in greater detail on Maundy Thursday night. For now all we need to know is that are two things. When we receive communion we are accessing something of that life giving Spirit. And even inevitable human rejection can't frustrate the loving purposes of God.