

Whose side are we on? 9 April 2017

Matthew 21:1-11

Most of you will remember the 1981 Springbok Tour. For those here who were not living in Aotearoa New Zealand at the time, or were yet born, this was a time of tremendous social upheaval, which arose over a tour by the South African rugby team. Back then, South Africa was an international pariah, because of its apartheid regime. And the tour was so polarising that there was little middle ground. It divided communities, workplaces, and even families. Supporters of the tour argued that politics should be kept off sport, while opponents objected to hosting sportspersons who were seen as ambassadors of apartheid.

I was 16 at the time, and I was staunchly anti-tour. And it was a life-defining time for me that helped shape the person I am today. To be openly anti-tour while living in the provinces was inviting persecution. We had abuse, eggs, and wheel nuts thrown at us. I went to every anti-tour demonstration there was in New Plymouth. Except for the one of the day of the local game, which was on a Wednesday, and my school kept a close watch on me to ensure I was not absent without leave. More for my own safety than for any other reason.

And I watched none of the games. Well not quite. I did watch the nail-biting second half of the chaotic final test at Eden Park, the last match of the tour. Even then, I pretended to be reading a book and not really watching, while my father was glued to the game, and I really struggled to remain poker faced when Allan Hewson kicked the winning penalty. Although I don't think fooled Dad.

The tour may have been over, but the country took some time to heal. I don't think I watched another game of rugby until the first World Cup tournament nearly six years later.

Now while it is true a majority of people did not take to the streets to express their views, many did, either by going to see the games, or by participating in demonstrations against them. But with few exceptions, including a certain recent prime minister, pretty much anyone who can remember the tour and who was old enough to understand the issues will clearly remember which side they were on.

Today's gospel reading describes Jesus' triumphant procession into Jerusalem. This was such a significant event it is described in all four gospels, and we remember it every Palm Sunday. More often than not, we hear about the symbolic significance of Jesus riding into the city on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey, or both, depending on which gospel we are hearing from that particular year. And we also often hear how just five days later, instead of there being a crowd that was proclaiming him to be the Messiah, there would be a crowd baying for his blood.

But last week I read about a very different procession into Jerusalem. One that some scholars say took place on the very same day as Jesus entered the city. The arrival of the Roman Prefect of Judea Pontius Pilate. Now Pilate wasn't usually in Jerusalem. He spent most of his time at his official residence in Caesarea Maritima, the Roman civilian and military capital of Judea, which was on the Mediterranean coast, just over 120 km from Jerusalem by today's most direct road.

It was customary for Roman Prefects of Judea to be in Jerusalem during major Jewish religious festivals, and they didn't get more major than the Passover. Pilate would have been well aware the Passover celebrated their liberation from an earlier empire, Egypt, so this was a time that feelings could well run high about the current occupation of Palestine. So he was expecting possible trouble during Passover week, especially with the massive influx of Jews into the city for the occasion.

Two different processions into Jerusalem represented two very different kingdoms. Pilate represented the power, glory, and material wealth of Rome. He would have been riding a fine war horse and he would have been accompanied by a strong military presence, to show the might of the empire, to discourage any thoughts of rebellion, and to reinforce the imperial garrison in Jerusalem, in case there was any trouble. Rome had a way of maintaining peace, and that was violence.

But Jesus represented a very different kind of kingdom. As he would say to Pilate later that week, "My kingdom is not from this world."¹ Jesus was riding a donkey and/or colt that had never seen battle in a peaceful counter-demonstration to Pilate's highly military grand entrance. This was a pretty subversive act. And he taught a radical message of love, forgiveness, justice, and peace that was completely at odds with the Roman way of doing things. No wonder their response to him was the cross.

Last year, American theologian Adam Ericksen wrote, "When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he was revealing that the reign of God is in stark contrast to the reign of Rome and every other

political system that seeks triumphant victory by influencing people through violence and coercion.”²

In 1981, New Zealanders had to decide which side they were on. And I invite us to reflect on how today’s gospel reading relates to the here and now, and to consider whose side we are on.

I am pretty certain I am not the only person in this church who has been somewhat alarmed by the events in Syria over this last week. The recent escalation of the situation there highlights the stark contrast between those two processions into Jerusalem all those years ago, and the need to choose between the ways of the world, and the ways of God.

Are we on the side of Pilate, and the powers and principalities of this world, and put our trust in the ways of force, coercion, and violence? Or are we on the side of Jesus, and put our trust in his ways of justice and peace?

So this Holy Week, as we approach the inescapable violence of the cross, I ask that we ask ourselves, whose side are we on?

Darryl Ward

9 April 2017

www.theword.tk

¹ John 18:36

² <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/teachingnonviolentatonement/2016/03/the-subversive-politics-of-palm-sunday/>