

God's Peace Process

Luke 19:28-40

On Wednesday of this week US President Barack Obama visited the Holy Land. Israeli air space was closed for an hour for the arrival of Air Force One. Obama was greeted by Israeli President, Benjamin Netanyahu, and many other dignitaries, politicians, soldiers and a military orchestra. From there he flew by helicopter to Jerusalem, a journey of only 60 kilometres. But his entourage of 600 travelled by road, which the main highway between the two cities had to close to allow their safe passage.



The purpose of Obama's visit was to appeal to Israelis to support the

peace process with Palestinians. The only way to a secure future, he said, was to strike a peace deal with their Palestinian neighbours. He said: "It is not fair that a Palestinian child cannot grow up in a state of her own, and lives with the presence of a foreign army that controls the movements of her parents every single day. Neither occupation nor expulsion is the answer. Just as Israelis built a state in their homeland, Palestinians have a right to be a free people in their own land."



One journalist commented that Obama's speech "was strong on rhetoric but light on details about how the peace process might move forward." We shouldn't be surprised; for over 40 years the world has tried to find a way to solve the Middle-East conflict. Will the Holy Land ever see peace?

Almost two thousand years ago another man prepared to enter the city of Jerusalem. His preferred mode of transport wasn't a helicopter but a donkey. Nobody closed the main highway between Bethany and Jerusalem. Only his disciples and a few antagonistic Pharisees even noticed that he was there. But the visit was no accident. It had been 33 years in the making.

Jesus came to the gates of the city whose name means 'foundation of peace,' but there was no peace.





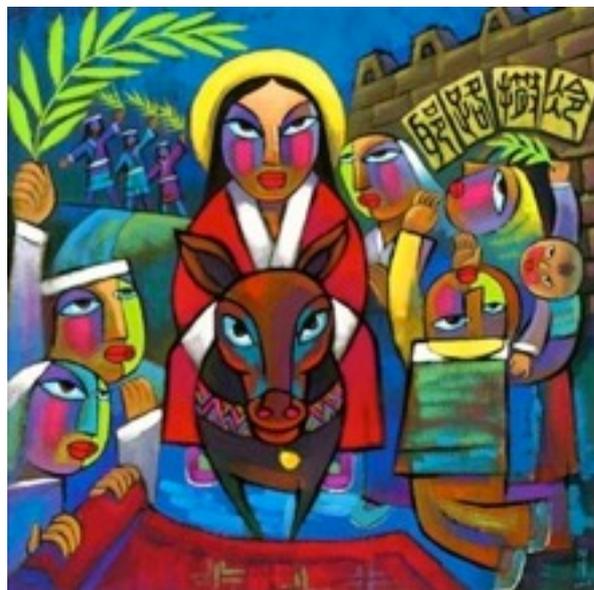
Jerusalem suffered under the tyranny of the pax Romana, peace and civil order that came through a sword. Jesus wasn't only one entering Jerusalem that day. He was joined by thousands of Jews making their pilgrimage to the holy city to celebrate the festival of the Passover.

But Jesus does something quite unusual. Although Jesus and his disciples have travelled all the way from Galilee by foot, for the final step of the journey he rides a donkey, symbolising a king entering in procession after a military victory. Except that kings would normally ride a mighty war horse, and they would have the defeated enemy commander bound in chains, humiliated by the cheering crowds. And then he would be publicly strangled.

But this King is different. He echoes Zechariah's prophetic word: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The King sits on a spindly, skittish creature called a donkey. What victory is he claiming? Where is the enemy ready to be sacrificed? These questions will only be answered when the week is up. And in ways that no one could have expected.

The disciples themselves prepared the way for Jesus. Others didn't appear interested, or at least Luke doesn't notice them. They threw their cloaks on the ground. Then, as they reached the Mount of Olives, they begin to sing. Pilgrims would normally sing through the Psalms 120 through to 134, the songs of ascent, as they climbed into Jerusalem.

But Jesus' disciples chose something different. "They began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" These are words from Psalm 118, but can you hear something else? Isn't there an echo of the angels' song that rang out through the heavens as the birth of Jesus was announced? This strange, unlikely King is the peace-bringer. And he's going to bring about peace in a most astounding way.



The Pharisees told Jesus to ask his disciples to shut up. Perhaps they didn't want attention drawn to Jesus in case the Romans think he's a crazy pretend-king. They wanted to keep the peace, and their cosy relationship with the powers that be. But their opposition was only the beginning of the trouble that Jesus would experience in the week to come. Jesus taught in the temple, but his words and actions caused uproar. He yells in a holy rage, "My house shall be called a house of prayer but you have made it a den of robbers." He spoke of the destruction of the holy city itself. He witnessed heated words between the twelve, as they argued over priority in the kingdom he promised.

Late at night on Passover eve, after wrestling with God in prayer, he was surrounded by temple police and betrayed by one of his own. He was accused, beaten, mocked, spat upon, humiliated, sentenced to death, hung on a cross. Even God his Father appeared to turn against him. He died a shameful death.



Remember the questions earlier. What victory is Jesus claiming? Where is the enemy ready to be sacrificed? Jesus doesn't lead the enemy in victorious procession, because the enemy was all around him. The enemy was each one of us, each act of lovelessness, or spiteful anger at others, our apathy toward God.

But there's an even greater shock in store. Jesus didn't turn on us. He allowed himself to become the enemy. This strange king riding on a spindly donkey is our peace. In his peacelessness, and finally in the hell of separation from his Father, he forged a cosmic peace, one that stretches from heaven to earth. Jesus absorbed the cruel blows of a broken world. He took these wounds on himself, and

through his loving sacrifice he took away their power to hurt and destroy. Jesus' cross neutralised all evil. His resurrection condemned it to eternal death.

In Ephesians 2, Paul writes: "Jesus himself is our peace...His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." Paul is speaking here of the hostility between Jew and Gentile, still sadly on centre stage in the Middle East, and wherever peoples and nations fight against one another.

President Obama's visit to Israel was another in the long line of international visits designed to advance the cause of peace in the Holy Land. What hope do we hold that he will be successful? Whatever peace process can be carefully negotiated with be mediated through the barrel of a gun. While the hearts of both Israelis and Palestinians are hardened toward one other, there can be no peace. This is true of all humanity.



Jesus, on the other hand, was light on rhetoric but strong on details about how God's peace process might move forward. When he spoke about peace, he backed it up by actions that lived peace. If we've been listening closely to Luke the whole way through his gospel, we'll realise the kind of peace Jesus has been working toward: we see it in the way that he eats with sinners and all kinds of undesirables, in the way that the powerful and the rich will be brought down, and the poor and the destitute will be lifted up. At the beginning of this chapter we see how Jesus conversation with the tax collector Zacchaeus turns his life upside down. He now seeks to bring peace and restoration, whereas before he was looking simply to rip people off.

This peace is active, not passive. It's not the absence of violence, but the presence of God's life-giving spirit in human beings. We are the people who have received this kind of peace in our lives. Our standing with God is clear. Our relationship with him is secure. Our mission is to live fully in the shalom of God, and to bring peace into our world, our relationships.



Go and make a difference. Go and set about applying God's healing to the conflicts in which you are enmeshed; those within and those with others. Pray and act out the implications of Jesus' peace-making on the cross, in situations big and small. Do what you can, in to add your voice to the disciples, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest." Amen.

Tom Mullen, a member of the Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, makes this point "If you really want to cause conflict, work for peace." That's what it was like for Jesus riding into Jerusalem. So it will be for us as we embrace Jesus' peacemaking ways. People who don't demand retribution stand out. People who call for compassion for the poor, the homeless and the refugee don't fit into the mainstream. People who turn the other cheek, hand over their coat, walk the extra mile and love their enemies run the risk of being seen as a soft touch, as do-gooders. Are you prepared to follow in the footsteps of your Lord and Saviour and do just that?

