

Thomas Leenders, Sunday, March 20, 2016

Living ink: The Plot Thickens

You know that joke: “How do you make God laugh?

“...tell him your plans”

I love that joke. Because besides its implicit affirmation of Murphy’s Law, which appeals to the pessimist in me, I find it is undergirded by considerable theological depth. It broaches what theologians call the “theodicy” problem: namely: why is there suffering, why is there evil, why do bad things happen to good people. Why do bad things happen to God incarnate.

Place yourself, if you can try, in Jesus’ sandals on Palm Sunday. How quickly one goes from a crowd cheering to a crowd jeering. How quickly from proclamations of Prophethood to the mocking crown of thorns.

Now you are affirming that you are the Son of God.

And now you are imploring your Divine Father, with whom you share the same essence, to please “take this cup away, that [you] may not drink from it... “

And now you are dying, on a cross, demanding why God has forsaken you, and in so doing echoing the lamentations of Psalm 22:1.

In how short a time frame did these vignettes take place? In less than a week.

“Tell God your plans”.

Fast forward a couple of millennia and these vicissitudes are paralleled in the Lenten experience for us, Christians living in 2016: What a roller coaster ride this period leading up to Easter!

Mardi Gras, Shrove “gorge yourself on pancakes” Tuesday, Bonhomme Carnavale, women in peacock feathers dancing Salsa in Rio. That was Tuesday, six weeks ago. And then the very next day, the Roman Catholics you know come to work or school with a cross made of ash on their foreheads and are forsaking coffee or chocolate. And that is just how lent starts!

I’ll tell you my plans. My plan was to give a very different sermon than the one I settled on. But at some point yesterday, the spirit led me in a different direction. Also, my plan was to arrive early to Church today to practice with the choir, avoiding the traffic of the St Patrick’s day parade.

You know what? I think it is fantastic that this year Palm Sunday coincides with the St. Patrick’s day parade. Swap the clover leaf for a palm leaf, a float for a donkey, swap an Irish Saint for a Jewish Messiah et Voila!

Such was indeed my Sunday School understanding of Palm Sunday: as a Jesus parade day.

This image of Palm Sunday was reinforced by several Children's books and Sunday school lessons. And our United Church tradition of laying down leaves before the procession of the choir. It was a triumphal event.

Hosanna in the highest of the high church traditions.

The Mennonite Approach to Palm Sunday was, for me, among the more striking low Church adjustments I had to make when I chose to this particular church tradition in my teens. In contrast to the relatively high-Church tradition my parents had raised me in.... namely the United Church of Canada and the background Roman Catholicism of my mother's upbringing and her family, for Mennonites, the whole celebratory, Palm-leaf parade-y Triumphal entry dimension is played down, the humility of the Messiah's unseemly procession on the back of a donkey is played up. The Gospel of Matthew, I think, highlights the lowliness by pointing out that for a Saddle, the Disciples have placed their Tunics on the Donkey for Jesus to sit on, which I think is actually a sweet touch when you think about it. And as you may know, the donkey in near and far eastern cultures was often a symbol of toil and peace. The steed most Jews would have expected for a messiah was likely a mighty warhorse.

So, my meditation today turned out to be what to make of this ostensibly celebrative occasion that kicks off the holy week, the most important week, my mother always took pains to remind me, in the Church calendar. Given that we here know the plot of Holy Week, is it an odd time to celebrate? Right in the *homestretch* of Lent. Practically a fortnight before Good Friday.

From what I gather, our quasi-observance of lent is a relatively new development in Mennonite culture. The Old Orders do not, typically, see fit to specify a particular Calendar time to highlight the importance of repentance and self-denial. Parallel to their refusal to take vows in court, believing that one's "yays should always be yays, and nays always be nays" rather than having a special period set apart for full honesty, the old orders basically give up dancing and fancy clothing and pop culture trappings for "lent", if by "lent" you mean their whole lives.

However, perhaps in an Ecumenical gesture of outreach to our more mainstream Christian cousins, contemporary Mennonite worship calendars have made overtures towards an observance of lent, if somewhat muted. To me this sort of development is Ecumenicalism at its best. Having an openness to our sister cultures in Christ, to the degree that we allow ourselves to be transformed by them. This is indeed the Canadian multicultural model. I myself actually only began the practice of giving something up for lent after becoming Mennonite. I don't know about you, but self-denial does not come easily to me.

My Mom has been in town this week, being an enormous help to me. And on Thursday night, she watched as after getting popcorn and watching a cartoon together as a family, and then getting to read his choice of comic book, Kai melted down. The next day she remarked that I was the exact same way as a kid: I always wanted to have it all.

Still, I must say that some of my most memorable Lenten periods have been ones in which I felt I had made meaningful inroads towards self-denial. And I would like to take this occasion to ask

you to reflect now. Perhaps some of you have made Lenten vows, which you have observed with varying degrees of success and failure.

[Give testimonial here about love, shame and forgiveness!]

Many of us will have been in Church when Lent started and John Docherty asked us to reflect on where in our lives we could make room to be more welcoming as he encouraged us to seek to be more gracious and hospitable. With the beginning of holy week, take a moment to reflect on this. In the spirit of repentance echoed recently by Pastor René “to feel or show that you are sorry that you did and that you want to do what is right”. Let us take stock of this. How like we all are, in our own, damaged and imperfect ways to the crowds who make a big show of welcoming Christ. And we remember that there is still, and always time to welcome Christ, whom we meet in our neighbour, whom Jesus situates as “the least” among us.

Whom have we welcomed, and whom have we denied welcome? In prioritizing our own selves, whom have we left insufficient room for?

And in our proud desire for a Messiah to arrive in Glory, have we overlooked the often humble deployment of God’s unexpected Kingdom? Have we truly sought God’s will, or our own?

On a final note: I would like to suggest perhaps that the image of a roller coaster that I described before in discussing *our perception* of the unfolding of God’s will is ultimately flawed. Perhaps changing seasons would be a more fit metaphor for these ups and downs which constitute the natural ebb and flow of the unrolling of God’s providential will. This evokes nature and balance. Accordingly, our repentance and self-denial should be genuine and with the aim of improvement, but neither should we flagellate ourselves with shame and self-loathing.

A few months ago, Marc Paré gave a meditation on the message of loving one’s neighbour as oneself. He memorably made the point that there is a modern tendency to interpret “Love thy neighbour as thy self” in a way that reverses its radical meaning - by underscoring the love-of-self part. None of us, he suggested, are erring on loving our neighbors more than ourselves. Jesus, Marc argued, took Love of self for granted. And though I largely agree with Marc: the world would be so much better in so many ways if we all prioritized others and denied ourselves more. But, with due respect, I do think that Self-denial does **not** preclude self-love. And actually it is important that we have compassion for ourselves too. Indeed, sometimes I am given to self-loathing, self-recrimination and I don’t think there is anything noble or Christlike about that. And I know I am not alone in this. So while love of neighbour and God are our preeminent ethical

struggle, we should not underestimate that a genuine love of self (not to be confused with self-indulgence or selfishness) can also be a challenge. And perhaps we would do well to enjoy ourselves during the happy times between the low points and indeed to celebrate them without undue self-reproach.

For, in just such a way celebrate a Messiah who came into Jerusalem the few days before his human death full circle back to those few days before his human birth: with unexpected humility... on the back of a donkey.