

“Palm Sunday”

As some of you know, I have recently returned from a trip to Berlin, Germany. I went over to see my daughter who is studying there, and to visit a city replete with history and contemporary fascination. I was able to afford this trip because a dear friend of mine had racked up some miles on Swiss Airlines and he offered to use them to purchase my ticket. Such friends, and such opportunities, are rare, and I seized the chance. My friend's gift was particularly generous given the fact that he is Jewish, and with the exception of his father and an uncle, all the members of his paternal family were murdered by the Nazis. He has made his pilgrimage to Poland, to Warsaw, to the camps and to the field where his people were shot. Berlin is a place he will never go. Yet he had it in his heart to send me, so I could be with my daughter, and explore a city which bears witness to both the evil and the inspired accomplishments of humanity.

More than any other place I have been, the layers of history seemed to me to be transparent in Berlin. A city block could have a 19th-century building, run down and pocked with bullet holes, or covered over with new plaster, adjacent to a section of new buildings with smooth pastel facades, and those next to an open lot, with remnants of rubble from a bombed out building still strewn about. Statues of Prussian Kings in the West contrast with those of Marx and Engels in the East. And though West and East Berlin have been united now some 20 years, their respective political and economic orientations jostle uneasily. Berliners build a castle, blow up the castle and make plans to build it back again. Construction cranes are visible in every direction, sharing the skyline with 18th-century classical edifices which survived the bombs, or survived in the minds of the people and were rebuilt. The city is the physical manifestation of Berlin evolving; it is a metropolitan laboratory of destruction and creation.

Much more than other American or European cities I have visited, Berlin is up front about its pain and ugliness. The glory of the Brandenburg Gate is shadowed by the sobering and stark Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which is less than a block away. White wood crosses memorializing people who died trying to cross the Wall from East to West line the fence facing the imposing Reichstag - the German democratic Parliament. A statue commemorating the site where 55,000 Jews were rounded up and deported stands in a pleasant neighborhood where young mothers trundle their children to the ice cream stand and playground. One morning, I took a beautiful walk through the Tiergarten park; along with others, I enjoyed the early Spring sun, I watched folks with their dogs, saw gardeners planting flowers around a pond. I strolled across the street and by chance came across a marker at a bus stop commemorating the site where Action T4 - Tiergarten 4 - was implemented. This was the Nazi program to kill psychiatric patients. Horror and beauty, oppression and freedom, destruction and creation - these polarities are visibly partnered in Berlin.

Although cities have different vibes and characteristics, I think they must all share this quality: you can see the extremes which characterize humanity as you walk the streets. On Fifth Avenue in New York you see affluent women dressed in finery stepping out past homeless men hunkered down on the pavement, with their cardboard

signs and outstretched hands. You can see the same on Church Street. Beautiful art and the finest goods are found in buildings whose entryways are strewn with trash. Every day in every city, violence is perpetrated, and compassion is extended. A city is simply humanity concentrated; the city reflects who we are. Each one of us is fine and beautiful in some respects, and we are all capable of evil, to varying degrees. Throughout history and in the present it is clear that we are transcendently creative, and we are horrifically destructive.

The myths and stories of religion may serve to bring us insight into our own natures, so we can come to terms with our personal and collective trash and cultivate creative, life-nurturing qualities in ourselves and in our communities. These religious stories are only useful if they are relevant. They have to relate to the world as we know it, and they must speak to our hearts and minds. They must give us a sense of peace and show us a way to bring peace to our world. I surmise that for some of you the story of Palm Sunday may be far from your minds. At best, it may conjure memories of your childhood church and days gone by. So to get in shape for Easter, I want to practice a little resurrection this morning, and raise up this Palm Sunday story as relevant for our lives today. I propose to you that the Jerusalem which Jesus ponders from the hills, and weeps over, is simply a template for the city of humanity. This Jerusalem is Berlin and New York; it is Baghdad. Glory and joy coexist here with pain and suffering. Oppression and freedom, destruction and creation abound in Palm Sunday Jerusalem, mirroring every city, and every person in the city.

And although I am speaking of Jerusalem as a symbol, of course it was, and is, a real place. Jesus' entry into the city is recorded in all four gospels, and is, in the estimation of biblical scholars, an historical occurrence. As he travelled the road into the city, Jesus went through a transforming passage of glory and suffering.

In his book Constantine's Sword, James Carroll wrote:

"What was it to be a first century Galilean? In trying to imagine Jesus' experience...there is a key element yet to be considered. It is the most important element, yet it is also one often left aside....**War**...is the missing element.

War was not in any way missing from Palestine when Jesus was born. Nor was war missing from the direct experience of his followers, his followers' children, of their children, and of their great nephews. The origins of the Jesus movement, and ultimately of Christianity, cannot be understood apart from the century-long Roman war against the Jews, albeit a war punctuated by repeated acts of Jewish rebellion....

Between half a million and a million Jews lived in Palestine at the time of Jesus' birth." One in three were put to death by the Romans. "Already, when Jesus was born, the inhabitants of his region were a defeated, violated people....Roman armies had swept through many of the towns and villages of the country, raping, killing, and destroying nearly everything in sight. In Galilee, all centers of rebellion were brutally suppressed...."

Villages where rebellion fomented were burnt to the ground and their inhabitants were sold as slaves. Rebels were executed. After one rebellion in Jerusalem, the Romans crucified 2,000 people at one time - the roads into the city were lined with 2,000 crosses. And the Romans left the crosses up indefinitely, with their victims on them, to terrify the subjugated people.

From Mount Olivet, Jesus would have seen Roman soldiers at every major intersection, standing on top of the city walls, and surrounding the Temple. The Jews making their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover feast walked along roads lined with soldiers and crucifixes. I imagine it was similar to the road to the Baghdad airport today.

The gospels imply that Jesus knew he was riding into the center of the conflict when he entered Jerusalem, and that he knew he would meet his death there. All four gospels relate that he chose to ride on a donkey - poetically hearkening back to the journey on the donkey to Bethlehem preceding his birth, and to Hebrew Bible prophecies that the Messiah would come riding a donkey. The people would have known the tradition that a prince who came into a city **peacefully**, rode a donkey. With this intentional show of nonviolence, Jesus illuminated the road into the city, even as it was lined with crosses and Roman guards.

The word "hosanna" with which the people greeted him on the road means "Bless us," "Save us." The people were calling for Jesus, the visionary Rabbi, to save them from the terrible oppression and violence of occupation. Whether we speak of the first century, or the 21st century, the pleas and cries for healing and salvation ring out in the city of Jerusalem. To my mind, as long as the people of a city look to a source outside themselves for salvation, they are vulnerable to manipulation by false prophets, to use the old-fashioned term. These false prophets capitalize on the peoples' fears, frustrations, and suffering; they incite unthinking people to anger and violence in order to further their own ends. It happened in Berlin, it happens in Baghdad. Currently, Tea Party prophets are making a tour of the U.S., blasting their fear-mongering message in 42 cities across the country on their way to the capital.

"If only you had recognized the path to peace," Jesus said as he began his journey from Mt. Olivet, "but as it is, it is hidden from your eyes." The humble donkey which Jesus rode into Jerusalem helps us recognize the path. In the Hebrew Bible's Book of Zechariah, we read [Zechariah 9.9-10]

"Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Zion,
shout with gladness, daughter of Jerusalem!
See now your king comes to you;
he is victorious, he is triumphant,
Meek and riding on a donkey....
He will banish chariots from Ephriam
and horses from Jerusalem;
The bow of war will be banished.

He will proclaim peace for the nation.”

Father Emmanuel Charles McCarthy is the founder of the Program for the Study and Practice of Nonviolent Conflict Resolution at the University of Notre Dame. He is also a founder, along with the Catholic activist Dorothy Day and others, of Pax Christi-USA. Father Emmanuel writes: “It is certain that the manner of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem is meant to be a direct reference to this prophetic passage in Zechariah....Chariots and horses are the equivalent in Jesus’ time of today’s Stealth bombers and nuclear missiles: the maximal destructive technology of the hour....Look at the words, this victorious king will proclaim ‘peace’ and his kingdom...will be completely without arms, the instruments of human destruction, the ‘bow of war.’”

Father Emmanuel further comments “This unambiguous Nonviolent Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem is the beginning of the end of Jesus’ journey of Nonviolent Love of friends and enemies for the salvation of all people. Contrary to popular piety, it is not merely a...way of suffering....His...is a Way of suffering chosen in order to confront and conquer evil in a sin-drenched world, not suffering chosen for its own sake or for the sake of placating an unforgiving, ‘eye for an eye,’ revengeful, terrorist deity. Jesus’...is the choice of the Way of nonviolent suffering love of friends and enemies in order to embody and make visible...Nonviolent Love for all....”

[\[http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig7/mccarthy8.html\]](http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig7/mccarthy8.html)

“To suffer” can mean to feel pain, but it also means “to experience” or “to undergo.” In 2005, German President Horst Kohler said “We Germans remember with horror and shame the Second World War unleashed by Germany and the Holocaust, this breakdown in civilization for which Germans are responsible. And we remember the six million Jews who were killed with fiendish energy....We have the responsibility to keep alive the memory of the agony and its causes, and we must ensure that it never returns.” [\[http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,1576703,00.html\]](http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,1576703,00.html) As I walked around Berlin, I saw graffiti saying “Wir werden nicht vergessen,” “We will not forget.” I saw sheets hanging from windows of apartment buildings with this saying, and the word “Nimmermehr” “Never again.”

I thought about what it must be like to experience - to suffer - the memory of the atrocities perpetrated by one’s country every day - as you waited for the bus at the Tiergarten 4 stop, or walked to the grocery located across from a collection point in your neighborhood. What would it be like to live in such a city? A city - a country - aware of its vulnerabilities and ever vigilant against the ignorant element which is always looking to incite fear and violence? What if our own cities publicly commemorated failures and transgressions as well as accomplishments? For every city, every people, has both beauty and evil within. Perhaps with increased awareness of our full humanity, we would evolve into a people with humility. And humility, like a donkey, can be ridden courageously in a Palm Sunday nonviolent mind.

AMEN

