

Symbols of Faith and Holy Week, Palm Sunday, March 28, 2010
Newtonbrook United Church, Scripture: Luke 19: 28 – 40
A reflection by Rev. Allan Baker

Holy Week begins today – Palm Sunday. In this time this morning we will be reviewing some of the symbols of our Christian faith that speak to us in Holy Week, and reviewing what this week may mean to us. A question for all of us, myself included, is whether we Christians in the 21st century place sufficient meaning on Holy Week, and the events of the final week of the life of Jesus?

As we reflect on our lives as Christians, and as a Christian community that is called Newtonbrook United Church, we know that this week we will be living through the final week of Lent, the week that immediately precedes Easter. There is an increasing tendency within the church as a whole to value Holy Week services, and particularly Good Friday. I remember being involved in a Good Friday parade on the streets of Richmond Hill, and being amazed at the number of people who were attending the local Roman Catholic services. Many of our UCC congregations are now offering worship on both Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

One of the reasons for this renewed commitment to worship in Holy Week is theological, I believe. You may remember that the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis, warned all of us of what he labeled, “cheap grace”. That is grace that does not take seriously the existence of sin, or the radical call to servanthood. Bonhoeffer wrote that Jesus calls us to follow him – all the way to the cross!

It is in following Jesus all the way that we move beyond the happy times of Palm Sunday and Easter, and contemplate what it must have been like for Jesus to suffer, be humiliated, and die. The resurrection that we celebrate on Easter, with its promise of all things new, has a context of death and endings. It is only:

- in walking through the shadows and darkness of Holy Week and Good Friday;
- only in realizing the power of sin and evil in this world;
- only in experiencing the horror of the crucifixion;

that we can truly feel the power of Easter Sunday.

In experiencing the truth that new beginnings come from endings, many people are coming to realize that Holy Week can be like a parable for their own life.

Palm Sunday:

We here at Newtonbrook United Church have already had our “Palm Sunday parade”, and a brief introduction to this symbol.

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On the screen there is an image of palm trees. This Sunday is a celebration of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. I say triumphal because in the Gospel According to John, Jesus travelled to Jerusalem several times.

Luke's Gospel records Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey. This was a symbolic act – it did not “just happen.” According to the Hebrew Scriptures, Zechariah 9:9, Jesus was doing this to underline the fact that the Kingdom of God – a consistent theme in his preaching – was to be marked by humility.

Colours – Red and purple:

Colours are also symbols. You will see that we now have two colours to look at – red and purple.

In most Protestant traditions the colour purple is used throughout Lent, including Holy Week, until Easter Sunday. In the Catholic tradition the colours are changed to red for Palm Sunday. The red colours that are used in liturgies are to symbolize blood that has been shed – and death. On Palm Sunday, it symbolizes the death of Jesus. For our neighbours who are engaged in the Catholic tradition of the Christian faith, Palm Sunday is also called Passion Sunday, anticipating the impending death of Jesus. In those congregations there is an emphasis on the story of the events that lead to the death of Jesus, and this provides some balance to Easter celebrations. It means not having two “happy” Sundays in a row. Heaven forbid!

Maundy Thursday:

Another important symbol for Holy week is the bread and wine.

When I was a youth, Maundy Thursday was not a part of our United Church way of worship. When I returned to the church I was invited to attend a Maundy Thursday service at Cliffcrest United, and I experienced one of the most intimate communion services of my life. It was a re-enactment of the Last Supper in that upper room; the final meal that Jesus and his disciples ate together.

Here at Newtonbrook United Church we mark Maundy Thursday with a Taizé worship service. We re-enact the Last Supper by serving communion. What would it have been like to have been at that meal, knowing what we know now?

Sometimes the Maundy Thursday services begin with a footwashing ritual – preceeding a commandment from Jesus. According to John's Gospel, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples to illustrate, once again, a spirit of humility, and of servanthood.¹ This refers us back to the words of Bonhoeffer and “cheap grace.”

¹ John 13: 34, 35

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Good Friday – the cross:

When I was attending Emmanuel College, one of the discussions concerned the prominence of the cross in various church buildings. The theory was that the theology of those who constructed the building was evident through the visibility of the cross in the sanctuary.

This week I spoke with a colleague who said that she was about to advocate that the cross be removed from the walls of the church building. I did not agree. Still, I can understand her reasoning.

Her motivation for suggesting that the cross be removed is that Christians today do not take this symbol seriously.

To me, the cross has been a central symbol of our Christian faith. Many Christians wear the cross as a demonstration of the fact that they are “Christian.” Other people may wear it as jewelry, I don’t know.

The cross, of course, is a symbol of sacrifice and it has a question for Christians through the ages. The question of the cross is how close are you willing to come? How willing are Christians – that’s you and I – to make sacrifices for our faith? Are we willing to follow Jesus all the way to the cross?

Attending worship on Good Friday is not popular – especially for Christians who do not read Bonhoeffer.

In the interest of full disclosure, I do not read Bonhoeffer frequently. I think I know what he means and I think that attending Good Friday worship, and coming close to the cross, is an essential part of knowing in our hearts what it means to be Christian. Jesus died on the cross – executed by the Empire.

The Vigil:

The Good Friday worship services in the ancient traditions of the Christian church were frequently followed by a prayer vigil on Holy Saturday. Holy Saturday was also a day of fasting. This fasting was originally for a period of 40 hours – concluding at sunrise on Easter Sunday.

Here at Newtonbrook we will follow the practice of having a prayer vigil this year. This is something new – an opportunity. Our prayer vigil will extend from the end of our Maundy Thursday worship, through the night, and conclude with the Good Friday worship.

A prayer vigil is a way of engaging our faith. In my journey, being in the sanctuary for an hour at Cliffcrest in the darkness of the evening, or night, was a truly

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spiritual experience. I have been involved in other vigils, and from my experience I can testify how deeply my spiritual life has been moved through this simple act.

Conclusion;

This has been a review of some of the symbols that assist us in our Christian faith. I say assist, because symbols are a language that helps us to express what we may fail to express in our common vocabulary. Symbols are a powerful language of their own, and not to be taken lightly. That's one reason why my colleague contemplates the removal of the cross from the sanctuary. Symbols remind us of the sacrifice of Jesus; they remind us of the superficial support of crowds who were there on Palm Sunday, but not on Good Friday; They remind us of the oneness that Jesus spoke about at the Last Supper They remind us of the importance of prayer, and even liturgical colours can convey messages.

Following up from last week's report on my retreat time with John Bell, we are now invited to sing, and to reflect on, the words of this song written by John Bell.

#126 in Voices United – Ride On, Ride On, The Time Is Right

Questions for reflection:

1. Do we Christians in the 21st century place sufficient meaning on Holy Week, and the events of the final week of the life of Jesus? If not, why not?
2. What does the cross symbolize in your life? Is it important that we continue to have the cross displayed in worship?
3. What is the role of sacrifice in the lives of Christians in Canada in the 21st century? How does it relate to our desire for "comfort"?
4. Will you be a part of the vigil? If not, why not?
5. Is Easter less important to 21st century Christians than Christmas?