

**Matthew 21:1-13**

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’ This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer”; but you are making it a den of robbers.’

Our Lenten journey of healing this morning takes us into the realm of healing among peoples and nations. Reconciliation is complicated.

A story appeared in *The Christian Monitor Weekly* which explores the state of reconciliation in Humboldt, SK from the early months of 2023. For those who have forgotten, it was April 6, 2018 when a semi crashed into a hockey bus which killed 16 and injured 13 others. The trial regarding the deportation of the semi driver has been on-going. Within the article prior to my upcoming quote author, Sara Miller Llama, noted that the bus driver has not shied from his responsibility for the crash or any consequences he might face; he has demonstrated remorse. Truth is hard; reconciliation is equally challenging. To the article.

“Not all the parents were against forgiveness. But not all the parents were on board either.” Says the Rev. Joseph Salihu, the priest at the Roman Catholic parish of St. Augustine’s in Humboldt at the time of the crash. “And it was difficult for them. They were not prepared, and one should not place a value judgement on that.”

“The expectation of forgiving is not always applied equitably”, says Dr. Maclachlan, [a professor of philosophy]. “We are uncomfortable with the idea of an unforgiving victim, because it’s almost like there’s something wrong or problematic or a sort of failure to be self-actualized in remaining angry.... There’s much to admire about forgiveness. There can be something really important in refusal to forgive.”

Everett Worthington, a professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University says “Forgiveness is a choice that we can make, and is only one of the ways that we can deal with this lingering sense of injustice,” he says. It can close the injustice gap. “What I always say to people is not everybody has to forgive, and that takes a lot of the morality out of it—because people feel very resentful if you suggest that they have to forgive. They may not want to forgive.” He adds, “We shouldn’t expect them to be in the same place.”<sup>1</sup> As one begins to see, reconciliation is complex.

To South Africa where truth is hard; and reconciliation is equally challenging. There is a passage within the *Book of Joy* which explores the place of anger within truth and reconciliation for former Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The narrator of the book, Douglas Abrams, begins:

“What, I wondered, was the role of righteous anger? The Archbishop, during the kills that often marred the peaceful protests against apartheid, would raise a fist and a rant, calling down fire and brimstone against the evildoers of injustice. His biography, by his long-time press secretary John Allen, is called *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*, which...describes the paradox of the Archbishop’s struggle for freedom. He was not afraid of anger and righteous indignation in pursuit of peace, justice, and equality in his homeland.

The Archbishop simply and succinctly explained the power and limits of this use of anger. “Righteous anger is usually not about oneself. It is about those whom one sees being harmed and whom one wants to help.” In short, righteous anger is a tool of justice, a scythe of compassion, more than a reactive emotion...it is a chosen response and not simply an uncontrollable

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Miller Llana, “When Is A Debt To Society Paid?” in *The Christian Monitor Weekly* (Week of February 6, 2023), pp. 24.

reaction. And it is not about one's own besieged self-image, or one's feelings of separation, but of one's collective responsibility, and one's feeling of deep, empowering connection."<sup>2</sup>

This quote made me think about our scripture passage of the day. It is framed by healing stories of those restricted from entry to the temple; literally not allowed into the temple courts. Prior to the triumphal entry, Jesus restores the sight of two blind men (20:29-34). After the temple incident, Jesus offers cures to the blind and lame (21:14). The passion of Jesus comes from a place of compassion for the blind, lame, and others who suffer exclusion and exploitation.

Harold Kushner reflected on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process in his book *Living a Life That Matters*. "Consider what has happened in South Africa after the end of apartheid. Faced with thousands of acts of murder and brutality committed by hundreds of soldiers, police, and other government officials over the course of decades, the new government realized that trying to bring every guilty party to trial would tie up the courts for years, rekindle bitter feelings, and racially divide a country that desperately needed to heal. What they did instead was to establish the TRC, whose purpose was partly to get the perpetrators to confess their crimes and show remorse under a promise of amnesty, but mostly to serve as a forum for victims to tell their stories in public and be listened to. I suspect that even those who created the TRC could not have foreseen how great the healing power of being listened to and taken seriously would turn out to be."

A bit further in the chapter Kushner cites a statistic from the South African TRC process that "In about half the cases where family members are invited to give a statement, once they have been listened to it no longer matters to them how severe the sentence is...The experience of being listened to and taken seriously by the judge and jury cured that feeling of helplessness that being a victim imposed on them, and restored their power."<sup>3</sup>

Cole Arthur Riley notes that mere truth telling is often not enough. She writes, "Truth-telling is critical to repair. But confession alone—which tends to serve the confessor more than the oppressed—will never be enough. Reparations are required. To expect repair without some remittance would be injustice doubled. What has been stolen must be returned. This is not vengeance, it is restoration"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (New York: Viking—an imprint of Penguin Canada, 2016), pp 105-106.

<sup>3</sup> Harold S. Kushner, *Living a Life That Matters* (Toronto: Random House of Canada LTD, 2001), pp. 102-108.

<sup>4</sup> Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us* (New York: Convergent Books, 2022), 137-138.

As one begins to see, reconciliation is complex.

To the Gospel lesson where truth is hard; and reconciliation is equally challenging.

We hear the story of the triumphal entry every year, and yet there is a story behind the story that we rarely have time to explore on Palm Sunday. The triumphal entry draws upon texts and images with which the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish community would have been familiar. Let me explain.

First, Jesus marches from Bethany on the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem. The Mount of Olives is mentioned only once in Hebrew Scriptures: Zechariah chapter 14. In that chapter God uses the Mount of Olives as a staging ground to reclaim a defiled Jerusalem. The reclamation project is graphic and without restraint. Jesus also uses the Mount of Olives as the place from which to launch his assault on an occupied and corrupt Jerusalem. The symbolism would not have been lost on the crowds. The methods of salvation which Jesus employs, however, do not conform to the story line of Zechariah 14. He is one that is willing to put hostility to death through his death for the sake of his disciples, the Pharisees, the tax collectors, the soldiers, and even us. This does not mean that Jesus endorses injustice, just that he deals with it different than most courts.

Moving from the Mt. of Olives to Jerusalem, Jesus chooses a donkey for the short distance—some 3-5 kilometers. Given the brevity of the trip, riding on a donkey is clearly symbolic.<sup>5</sup> The donkey represents humility as opposed to a war horse used by most generals of Rome returning home. The donkey is an additional reference to Zechariah 14 reinforcing the expectations surrounding a saviour's journey from the Mt. of Olives to Jerusalem. It is the humility of Jesus, and the people of God through ages, which has been one of the most powerful dimensions to the witness of real and lasting reconciliation.

Then there are palm branches. The last time Jewish nationals had an opportunity to sport the palm branches for one of their heroes was none other than Simon Maccabeus. It is documented in 1<sup>st</sup> Maccabees, a part of the Hebrew bible. Simon Maccabeus had laid siege to occupied Jerusalem and starved the opposition. He made his way into Jerusalem surrounded with palms for the mop up operations. Simon then declared the Jewish state independent. The waving of palm branches, especially in a parade, symbolized victory.<sup>6</sup> Jesus comes into Jerusalem with such greenery, and yet that victory had yet to be claimed. Between here and the coronation wreath will be anger, grief, suffering, self-sacrifice, and death.

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<sup>5</sup> M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Volume VIII), (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press: 1994), 403.

<sup>6</sup> (RSV study bible note on 1<sup>st</sup> Maccabees 13.51; see also 2<sup>nd</sup> Maccabees 6.7 and 10.7 for use of palms and greenery as part of celebrations of purification and conquest).

Frustration and anger make me think of Jesus in the temple. It is widely accepted that the actions of Jesus in the Temple are symbolic. A treatment of the Temple scene deserves its own Sunday, so I will just note that Jesus takes liberation into the realm of national and theological apartheid.<sup>7</sup> The temple with its distorted theology will shift, in the Jesus model, from a specific location to a spiritual condition. This renewal will not happen through starvation and execution, which both the Romans and Maccabees employed. Anger, yes; violent retribution, no. The Mt. of Olives, a donkey, palms, a symbolic act in the temple—they point us in new directions as we consider reconciliation with God, neighbour, and nation. It will come at the cost of lives—the life of Jesus and many martyrs through the centuries. Reconciliation is complex, and not cheap.

As one begins to see, reconciliation is complex.

Truth is hard; and reconciliation is equally challenging when we think of Canada.

I return to a comment Rabbi Kusher cited that about “half of the cases” were positively impacted by the South African TRC process. That might be too high if we consider our own TRC process in Canada, or maybe not. Chris Harper is the new national Indigenous Anglican archbishop and presiding Elder of the Sacred Circle. Harper has seen the damage inflicted on Indigenous Peoples throughout Saskatchewan—personally and professionally. He said reconciliation, more or less, hasn’t started yet. “Understanding, conversation, communication, healing and reconciliation. Those have always been...my focus and I’m going to continue those now in more of a national sense, and that means going from coast to coast to coast.”<sup>8</sup> He sees that much hard work is yet before the church and country. The auditor general’s report from earlier this week highlighted that access to clean water and internet services in Canada lag in many of our indigenous communities.<sup>9</sup> Reparations have not been made, Cole Riley would say.

At the same time, I am encouraged by stories found in a book entitled *Bridges Over Fences*, by Gordon Lobe which recounts positive stories of interaction among indigenous and settler communities.<sup>10</sup> Steve Heinrichs has edited several books which detail the broader partnership and challenges between Indigenous peoples and the settler community.<sup>11</sup> There are points of progress.

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<sup>7</sup> See M. Eugene Boring, p. 406.

<sup>8</sup> Becky Zimmer, “Walking in Two Worlds” in the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* (Tuesday, March 14, 2023), City and Region section, A3.

<sup>9</sup> Anja Karadeglija and Christopher Nardi, “AG Report: 1.4M households lack access to fast internet speeds” in the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* (March 28, 2023), p. NP2.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Lobe, *Bridges Over Fences (from Culture to Culture) 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Saskatchewan: self printed—pglobe@sasktel.net).

<sup>11</sup> Most recently: *Be It Resolved: Anabaptist and Partner Coalitions Advocate for Peace and Indigenous Justice and Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*.

In conclusion I want to parallel the *Christian Science Monitor* article with the story of the Amish at Nickel Mines, PA earlier in this century where children were shot in their school room. My thoughts returned to this classroom tragedy as we all processed another school shooting this past week in the U.S at the hands of someone with emotional instability who had access to guns.

At the time the response of the Amish families and community shocking and largely incomprehensible to American society. Even as their hearts were breaking, they reached out in love to the gunman's wife and family. They didn't question why this happened. They recognized the dangerous consequences of a man with mental illness and a gun. They rose above the whys and the blaming to work on making the gunman's wife and family feel accepted and forgiven by God and their community. The public had never heard of such a thing nor could they understand where it came from. They were used to blame and rage and retribution – roots of the ongoing culture of violence in North America. What made the Amish different?

Several Mennonites scholars who wrote *Amish Grace: How forgiveness transcended tragedy* highlighted five practices that grounded the Amish in their response: the Lord's Prayer, the teachings of Jesus, the Martyr's Mirror, the songs of their faith, and their trust in a God of Providence. The Amish didn't have to sit down and figure out how to respond to tragedy. It came swiftly and naturally because it was something they believed and practiced daily as a part of their home and church life.<sup>12</sup>

May the God of peace strengthen our inward spirits and souls as we seek to walk with Jesus to the cross this week, year, and the entirety of our lives. May his act of reconciliation for us, our peoples, and our world guide us in virtuous living. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, Davide L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007), parts 2-3.