

Church of the Crossroads
Palm Sunday
March 16, 2008
Neal MacPherson

IN AND FOR PEACE

Zechariah 9:9
Matthew 21:1–11

This coming Wednesday, March 19, will mark the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the war in Iraq, and I ask us now to keep a time of silence to seek the sustaining presence of God and to pray for the people of Iraq and for our sons and daughters who are stationed there. I will then break the silence with a prayer written by the Rev. Yousif al Saka, an elder in the Presbyterian Church in Baghdad.

SILENCE

We beseech You, we humble ourselves for the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, to send your Holy Spirit to shade the land of Iraq, so that peace may prevail in its dwellings, and the acts of violence, kidnapping and persecution may cease; so that the displaced may return to their homes, the churches may reopen their gates without fear from shells and explosion; so that smiles may be seen again on the faces of children that have been stolen from them here in this difficult time; so that the elderly may lean back on their chairs in comfort and tranquility saying farewell to their children when leaving for work without anxiety or fear; so that mothers think only of happy, prosperous, and peaceful futures for their daughters and sons.

O Lord, have pity on us, we Iraqis. Let the light of your face shine on us, bless us, strengthen our belief, and bestow patience upon us. Amen.

This prayer, and our prayers spoken in the midst of the senseless killing and violence and in the midst of our own complicity in this unjustified war are in the name of Jesus the Christ, the One who entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in peace and for peace.

That is the bottom line. Jesus entered Jerusalem in peace and for peace. At the time when Jesus entered the city, there was great confusion. It seems that the crowds anticipated a conquering, triumphant warrior messiah, one who would lead the people in overthrowing their Roman oppressors. But Jesus entered the city in peace and for peace.

In re-creating the story, Matthew, along with Mark and Luke, had in mind the 9th verse from the 9th chapter of Zechariah, which envisions a future King of Israel who would usher in a messianic era. The verse reads:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
 Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
 Lo, your king comes to you,
 triumphant and victorious is he,
 humble and riding on a donkey,
 on a colt, the fowl of a donkey.

Not two animals are meant, but one. Matthew, misreading the verse from Zechariah as meaning two animals, has poor Jesus riding on the back of both a donkey and a colt!

With our focus on the two animals instead of the one, it might be easy to overlook the fact that Matthew has also eliminated part of the image framed originally by the prophet Zechariah. Matthew, in recalling the verse from Zechariah, eliminates the words that say: “triumphant and victorious is he.” He retains the humility:

“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.” —Mt. 21:5

In Matthew’s depiction of the scene, there is no triumph or victory. There is only the humility that comes when Jesus enters the city, not riding on the back of a mighty steed, as would an Alexander the Great, but on the backs of humble donkeys, animals of labor.

Jesus comes not in warfare and for warfare. He comes not in triumph and victory. He comes in peace and for peace. He is not an Alexander the

Great. He is a suffering Messiah. He is not on his way to a coronation. He journeys towards a cross.

He will forever shape our understanding of what is needed in our world. What is needed is not more warfare and violence, especially when these are based upon a fabrication of the truth wrought by a misguided ideology. What is needed in our world is an understanding that revenge is best left up to God, and that if humankind is to survive on the face of the earth, alternatives to violence and warfare must be discovered and acted upon.

It is not an easy path, the path of peace with justice. Taking the path, Jesus makes his way to a cross. And yet, perhaps even anticipating his fate, he still chooses to come in peace and for peace. May the spirit of this humble, gentle, peaceful, courageous and bold Savior govern our prayers, our lives, our actions, and our witness in the world always.