

“The Gravity Of A Christ”

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Mark 11:1-10

While in Israel, one location our group visited was the steps that lead up the Temple Mount. Although some of the higher steps have been rebuilt, the lower ones are carved out of the bedrock and thus are original to the time of the Second Temple and the time of Jesus. They are the same steps that Jesus would have walked upon when he entered the Temple precinct almost 2000 years ago. As our group stood there trying to grasp where we were, our guide shared with us the story about the time he was leading Neil Armstrong on a tour of the old city. As you know, Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon, yet as he stood on the temple steps, he wept openly and said, “I may have taken the first steps on the moon, but that means nothing compared to where I step now.” Although he had been to the moon and back, Armstrong was a man of faith, a faith that was grounded in the gravity of a Christ and his passion.

As we find ourselves on the threshold of Holy Week, we too are invited to pause and consider the events surrounding Jesus’ crucifixion. If we were to travel back 2000 years, unlike today, we would not have the gospel accounts to guide us. If we were Jews like the first disciples of Jesus, what would come to mind for us wouldn’t be Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, for they had not as of yet, been written. No, if you were a Jew, who knew your Scriptures and if you stopped to consider what Jesus said and what Jesus endured and how it related to faith, the scripture that would likely come to mind would be this text from Isaiah 53, that describes “the suffering servant.”

One cannot help but be struck by how similar is Isaiah’s description of the “suffering servant” to what Jesus embodied. A man who was a nothing, a no one, who came from some Galilean backwater to the big city of Jerusalem where he was going to set things right, show the world what it really meant to be God’s son, what it really meant to have faith, what a Messiah truly looked like. Of course the authorities in Jerusalem wanted to have nothing to do with this troublemaker from the sticks. “How could some itinerant preacher who grew up so far away

from the centre of culture and political and religious life know what it meant to be a good Jew, a real follower of the one God of Israel...let alone actually be the Messiah?" As Isaiah says, "like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.." Remember, even his first disciples when they heard of Jesus, grimaced and questioned whether "anything good could come out of Nazareth?"

It's not that the people of God didn't want a Messiah. There had been Messianic hopes amongst the Jews for centuries upon centuries. This was a people who had lived either in exile, oppressed as slaves, or in the midst of foreign occupiers for most of their history. This text from Isaiah 53 was written over seven centuries before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. It was at a time when the first temple in Jerusalem built by King Solomon had been destroyed by the Babylonians. The city had been reduced to rubble and most of the Jews were sent into exile. It was during that exile these words were spoken by the prophet Isaiah about the "suffering one" who would bring people back into righteousness. -In other words, the one who would restore their fortunes and deliver them into a future promise.

While the temple laid in ruin during that period (and in the years afterwards), many Jews would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the annual harvest festival. On the seventh day of the festival, people would take branches and lay them out over the ruins of the temple and shout "Hoshi 'ah nah" which literally means, "Save us please!" The very same words in the Hebrew are written in Psalm 118:25, "Hoshi 'ah nah" -save us please!

The Israelites were looking for restoration, not only of the temple, but of their people, their culture and the power of their God. They had faced the ultimate defeat, humiliation and desolation. They were looking for a Messiah. Those words, "Hoshi 'ah nah" literally meant not only "save us please!" but "Come Messiah" because the people knew they needed a Saviour...a Christ. And over 700 years later when Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem and the people are waving their palm branches and laying them on the ground before him, they are shouting, "Hoshi 'ah nah" ...or Hosanna or "please save us" ...come Messiah Jesus.

I think that everyone in their lives sooner or later comes to the realization that they need saving from something. A time when we have reached a point of desolation, hardship, exile...a loss of identity or purpose. Out of interest's sake I Googled the term "save me" this

past week and came up with over 2.5 billion results in three tenths of a second. Try adding searches with terms like “help me,” “assist me”, or “restore me”, or “aid me”, or “make new” ... the list could go on. How many songs have been written -and I’m not talking about religious hymns either- but how many songs from mainstream pop elicit pleas of distress from someone looking for a savior...a Messiah...a Christ? I hear them on the radio all the time.

And often it is the case when a person or a people cries out for someone to save them, what they really want is to have someone who will come along and do what they want. When most people ask for help they’re looking for something along the lines of a fairy Godmother or a Genie in a bottle –someone who will grant them their every wish. There are a lot of people in our world who dwell in the realm of wishful thinking. Everyone who plays the lottery is engaged in wishful thinking. It doesn’t take much for us to find ourselves caught up in wishful thinking and not even realize it.

I like how the words of a poem I recently read suggest this:

*I don't wish for much lately and I wish I knew why.*

*If I wished, I'd wish maybe that time didn't fly.*

*If it's just wishful thinking that's come upon me*

*then I wish it would go away and just leave me be.*

*Once young, I would wish for the good things in life;*

*like romance and money, with an absence of strife.*

*Now that I'm older, I just never wish.*

*Still, I guess if I did, I'd want more time to fish.*

*If wishes were horses, then I wouldn't need hay.*

*Who has the time to be wishing all day.*

*There is life to be lived and mountains to climb*

*and it makes a man wish that he had lots more time.*

You see, it doesn't matter who we are or how old we are. It can be easy for us to find ourselves getting caught up in wishing. Wishing things weren't this way...or wishing they were that way...or wishing that someone would come along and make things the way we think they should be. That's the big problem when it comes to wanting a Messiah, we limit ourselves to the Messiah we wish for -the Christ of our wishful thinking.

I noticed this kind of thinking this past week as I listened to some of the reports out of the Middle East regarding Obama's visit there. Many people interviewed and many observers were lamenting that Obama didn't come with a plan for peace. They are the wishful thinkers who see Obama as some sort of "deliverer" who should grant them their wishes. I have to laugh because this kind of thinking is pervasive in the world. Just look at public reaction to the budget this past week. Whenever a government announces a new budget these days, many wait and see if the budget fairy is going to come and give them the things they wish for. We do this in so many places in our lives. Our pleas of "Come Save Us!" are rooted in our own wishful thinking..."Come save us our way!" "Give us what we wish for."

But what we discover in the "suffering servant" is a Christ we wouldn't necessarily wish for. It is the Messiah of God's self-giving, self-sacrificing way of love. Remember the Christ the crowd met that first Holy Week as they waved their palm branches and shouted Hosanna? He was the Christ of their wishful thinking, the one who they thought would get rid of the Roman oppressors and restore God's people to their rightful place. The Christ we know as Jesus was one who took the way of the cross and the way of suffering in order to reveal a different kingdom and the way to life eternal. He was a light to many...offering genuine hope as a God who meets those who despair in the midst of suffering. As Isaiah puts it, "Out of his anguish he shall see light; The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities"

I was reminded of what this kind of hope means in our world as I started reading about the Journey of the Nishiyuu. Have you heard about the journey of the Nishiyuu? It's the 1300km journey from the James Bay Reserve in Northern Quebec along Hudson Bay that seven Cree youth began back in January. They expect to arrive in Ottawa tomorrow with numbers that have swelled to over 200. Sometimes I'm not sure if we understand what desolation truly is but

something tells me that these young men who have grown up on a reservation in northern Quebec sure do. In case you're wondering what the level of despair is for these young people, consider this, in Canada, the rate of suicide amongst our indigenous populations is two to seven times what it is in any other country when compared with the general population. Yet in spite of that sort of a statistic, in the Journey of Nishiyuu we have a group of teenage boys who seek to rise above that, and the conditions of reservation life by making this long journey by foot and braving the elements of our Canadian winter, to find themselves in the Capital as a symbol of unity. Sure there are some that will wonder what wisdom these kids from some nowhere place in northern Quebec will have to offer our leaders in Ottawa, but remember there were people who questioned Jesus the very same way.

These young men display that hope of change, of deliverance and of a future that is not something we just sit around and wish for, it is something requires a different spirit. A spirit that is grounded in what is truly human, that is grounded in the type of journey that is willing to bear the burdens and the cost so that hope can be known for the sake of others. That's the reality of Isaiah's suffering servant, it is the gravity of a Christ that changes lives with the passion of a God who suffers so others may know life. My friends, Holy Week is upon us and we are called to remember and celebrate the gravity of a Christ who grounds our steps, in what it truly means to know and show the power of a love that saves.

Thanks be to God.