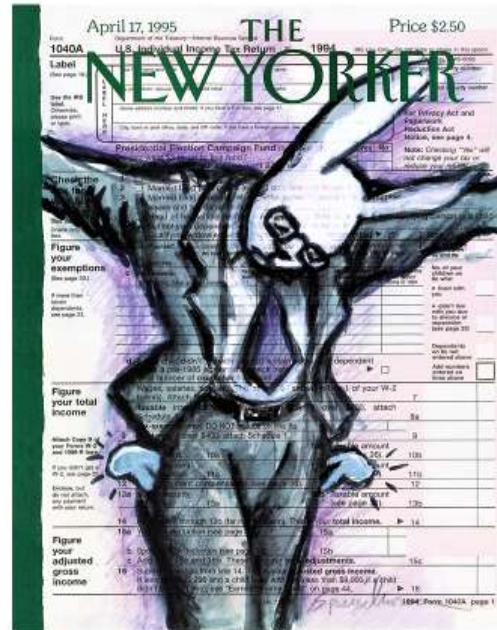


Trivializing the faith?

Palm Sunday

9th April 2017

Matthew 21:1-11



During Easter 1995 the New York commentator, Art Spiegelman, created a stir. His front page cartoon in a popular magazine depicted a white rabbit in a suit and tie posed in the mode of crucifixion. The rabbit's arms are extended as his head sags. His pockets are pulled inside out signifying being ripped-off while the image is superimposed on a regular income tax form. The title of Spiegelman's work is "Theology of the Tax Cut".

US tax returns were due just as Easter fell in 1995 and Spiegelman uses this opportunity to have a go at conservative Christians who, he believes, have allowed their particular brand of faith influence the national conversation on taxation. Here many conservative Christians advocate for minimal government intervention believing current rates of taxation inhibit initiative and growth. Spiegelman protests. Such a position, he believes, disenfranchises the poor. It reneges on public responsibility to provide adequate education and welfare.

Now, whatever you think about taxation, especially concerning the current debate here in Australia on cuts to company taxes (and I do not plan to go there!), a number of Christians who were affronted by Spiegelman's cartoon suggested the appropriation of sacred Christian symbols for the purpose of making a political point was an affront.

Here it is claimed Spiegelman trivialized the faith. He failed to respect what was incredibly important to others. Spiegelman belittled that which is significant. He "made lite" of something that is deeply meaningful to many.

This is not new. During the height of her career, the pop artist, Madonna, sang the song "Live to Tell" while hanging from a mirrored cross and wearing a crown of thorns.

Meanwhile an add airing on television overseas promotes a brand of men's deodorant with the tagline "angels will fall". Here a stylish Italian male model walks the streets of Rome as numerous gorgeous angels fall out of heaven smitten by the fragrance of the product.

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These pure, virtuous celestial beings impulsively remove their sparkling halos and smash them on the ground to be seduced by the irresistible temptations of the waiting male!

Rabbits being crucified, a pop-idol singing from a glittering cross or a number of heavenly creatures being lured out of heaven to be snared by a sexy bloke on the street may not seem all that controversial today. But it does raise issues concerning how seriously we take what we believe. Are there things about our faith that we are able to tolerate and are their things we are not prepared to compromise on?

Mel Gibson offers us a recent movie that raises such issues. With the title, Hacksaw Ridge, Gibson's offering tells the story of Desmond Doss, a young fellow from Lynchburg, Virginia, who enlists in the army with the intention of serving as a combat medic. Doss is a sincere, practicing Seventh Day Adventist and he is firmly committed to the commandment "*thou shall not kill*". Doss, therefore, refuses to carry a rifle and to train on the Sabbath. For this, Doss is accused of psychiatric illness and is tormented and beaten by his colleagues. Meanwhile he is threatened with prison on the charge of insubordination.

But Doss persists. He is assigned to serve as a medic on a Second World War battle front in the Pacific where, in an act of sheer courage, Doss goes on to save the lives of many of his colleagues without ever firing a shot. This is a true story and Desmond Doss was awarded the Medal of Honor for his war service by President Truman in 1945.

Palm Sunday raises issues here. Growing up through Sunday School, this day, Palm Sunday, has always been a bit of a "picnic" for me. It was a time for some light relief after the disciplined, heavy few weeks of Lent and before the dark, heady events of Holy Week that culminate in the crucifixion of our Lord.

Moreover, Palm Sunday often marked an element of fun as we scrambled through the neighbourhood searching for palm branches and often getting into trouble for defacing someone's prized tree! And on the actual day celebrations were akin to a festival.

In contrast to just about everything else at Easter, Palm Sunday is seen to be a child-friendly, "G-rated" event where we all let our defences down a little to wave branches, sing-out and be slightly more emotionally up-beat. Indeed, Palm Sunday can appear to be even a little comical – for, who can forget the year the donkey refused to come into the church – and when it did it wouldn't move out as I pronounced the benediction over the top of its butt!

So, Palm Sunday is for many of us, a kind of "fun" day. And there is nothing wrong with this provided we do not fall into the trap of trivialising or losing sight of what is really going on here.

For you see, Palm Sunday is an incredibly formative event in the Gospel narrative. Palm Sunday has some very poignant things to say. It is far from a being a frivolous, light-hearted event designed to provide some gentle relief in an otherwise testing saga.

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After a number of years of ministry beyond - particularly in Galilee - on Palm Sunday Jesus comes down the Mount of Olives and purposefully enters the City of Jerusalem through the East Gate. Now, this was no accident – it was highly significant!

This is, in fact, incredibly noteworthy because the East Gate of the city led directly into to the heart of the temple. It was the route the Jews believed their future Messiah would take as he came to liberate Israel and fulfil all the ancient prophecies.

The East Gate led to the Holy of Holies, the magnificent central edifice of the temple which was said to be God's dwelling place on earth and where the High Priest officiated in making sacrifices to atone or make amends for the sins of the world.

On Palm Sunday Jesus chooses this particular route. And it's all intentional. It's very intentional!

Indeed, so significant was the East Gate that the Ottomans sealed it up in 1530 to prevent a future Jewish Messiah from entering the city. And to make sure, they planted a cemetery right at the very foot of the walled-in gate on the assumption that no self-respecting Jewish Messiah would attempt to set foot in such a place!

The gate remains walled-up even today. It's located in the highly contentious and the rigorously secured Muslim quarter of the city.



Now we also know that on the day Jesus processed into Jerusalem via the East Gate another procession was taking place through the West Gate. Here Pilate, the "Prefect" of Judaea was entering the city together with his legion of military officers who were being brought to Jerusalem to reinforce the garrison that overlooked the temple.

Travelling from his base in Caesarea Maritima, Pilate came to Jerusalem to maintain order during the fiercely nationalistic festival of the Passover that celebrated Israel's liberation from Egypt centuries beforehand. Known for his short-tempered, terrifying brutality, Pilate enforced Roman occupation in the name of the emperor whose authority and whose very being claimed divine status rivalling everything the Jews believed.

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Pilate's arrival stood in stark contrast to Jesus. In many ways, Jesus' arrival was a deliberate counter-procession as Matthew tells us Jesus rode on donkey with its suckling colt in tow. This is such a contrast to Rome's fabulous warhorses and its spectacular military paraphernalia.

Meanwhile, Jesus came into Jerusalem with a focus on the Kingdom of God, a kingdom not of this world in terms of its values and priorities. This contrasted to the emperor's uncompromising rule that insisted on absolute subjugation to the interests and exploits of a vast imperial empire.

Friends, in all of this there is an overt message. On this day Jesus comes to inaugurate a new order, an order that defies the power, the corruption and the brutality of Rome. For this is an order committed to bringing about justice and peace for all people.

Thirdly, Jesus' procession is no accident in terms of biblical prophecy. Matthew and the other Gospel writers emphatically link this event with the words of the Old Testament prophet, Zechariah (Zechariah 9). Moreover, such an event is believed to be grounded in the actions of the great King David who also entered the city some one thousand years beforehand on a humble donkey (2 Samuel 16).

Meanwhile, just some 200 years before Jesus another procession took place in Jerusalem where a victorious Jewish group called the Maccabees reclaimed the city after the temple had been defiled and the people had been quashed by the oppressive rule of a Hellenistic empire. These Maccabean heroes of Israel celebrated the occasion in the form of a procession that was greeted with palm branches and shouts of praise.

Hence processions with palm branches were no accident. This means that on Palm Sunday something profound is being said. For, Jesus comes with an agenda to liberate people from the shackles that bind them down. Jesus comes to free people from all that undermines, degrades and destroys life.



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The Maccabees' passion was liberty for the Jews and one cannot help but think this matter was fresh in the minds of those who so earnestly received Jesus on that Palm Sunday. Here they acclaimed Jesus with cries of "*Hosanna*" - which literally means "save us!"

Friends, Jesus entering by the East Gate, his coming on a donkey, Gospel references to King David and the prophet Zechariah, the waving of branches and the call to "save us!" all point to Jesus' actions being what we refer to as being "Messianic".

In other words, on Palm Sunday Jesus declares openly he is the one who has been sent to save Israel. He is the One who has been set apart to give new life and a new future to all those who receive him.

Most importantly, this means Palm Sunday is a statement about the very nature of who Jesus is. Palm Sunday is a declaration concerning the very purpose of Jesus' ministry!

And what did Jesus do upon entering the city on Palm Sunday? He went straight to the temple where, in a very public rather provocative way, "cleansed" it.

Here Jesus overturned tables where money was being changed into appropriate coinage to pay the temple tax. Jesus accused those responsible for this graft as being "*a den of robbers.*" And Jesus condemned a system that was in collusion with Roman imperial power and the widespread corruption of the religious elite.



In doing so, Jesus asserted his claim upon Jerusalem as God's true Messiah!

Despite what may appear to be a light-hearted event providing some gentle relief to an otherwise heavy, demanding schedule, Palm Sunday makes an unequivocal statement about who Jesus is. Palm Sunday makes an indisputable declaration about the purpose of Jesus' ministry. And Palm Sunday sets the scene for everything that is to come.

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Over the years I have focused on Palm Sunday as being a day of peace. This is mirrored in the Palm Sunday peace marches that take place on this day in various cities around the world. They are important and I encourage you to be part of them. There is one on this afternoon in the city but, unfortunately, it clashes with our Community BBQ.

Palm Sunday is about peace - Jesus is a person of peace!

But there's more to it than that. Palm Sunday is about taking every aspect of life seriously, really seriously. Palm Sunday is about bringing us face to face with the very essence of what God is doing in Christ to rescue this world.

Palm Sunday is about opening us to the very reality of what God is doing in Christ to save you and to save me. Palm Sunday is about assuring us of God's intention to bring into being God's reign of justice, peace, wholeness and wellbeing through the person of God's Son!

So, by all means enjoy today. Resonate with the children in their fascination with donkeys and in their joy of waving palm branches. Join the frivolous crowd as they cheer Jesus. But, remember, there is more, far more to it than this.

Trivializing the faith – no way!

On Palm Sunday Jesus comes as God's chosen one. On Palm Sunday Jesus reaches out as the one who comes to save us. On Palm Sunday Jesus calls on us to put all these things into perspective by bearing witness to God's reign of justice and peace.

Indeed, on Palm Sunday as God's Messiah, as God's anointed one, Jesus calls on us to take him seriously – very seriously – and to give him number priority in everything, and I mean, everything we do - today and always!

Amen.



John Barr