

First Presbyterian Church

Marianna, Florida

Lenten Luncheon March 30, 2010

Reflections led by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Question for Reflection: How Did Jesus Use His Power and How Should We Use Our Power?

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for this opportunity during this Holy Week to pause again in the middle of this day to share this food and fellowship together, and most of all to pray, and to reflect on all of the power that you gave to your Son, Jesus, and how he used that power, and how you would have us to use the power you have given to us as your beloved children, and as the followers of Jesus Christ. Guide us in our reflections together that through them we may come to appreciate more the wonder of your amazing love for us and for the whole world in Jesus Christ your Son, for it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

Hymn Page 30

“Sweet Hour of Prayer”

stanzas 1 and 2

Unison Prayer:

Gracious God, we gather here today to learn more from the example you have given to us in the gift of Jesus, your Son. As we move into this Holy Week with him, show us how rightly to use the power you give us. Give us ears to hear your word, eyes to see your face, and

courage to follow the path you set before us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Our hymn has prompted us to think again about what prayer means in our lives. There has been the reminder of being able to take our wants and wishes to God and to cast on God all of our cares. At the same time there is the reminder that we come to God because God's truth and faithfulness want to bless our souls and our lives. This reminds us that prayer is not simply a matter of talking to God but also stopping to listen to God and what it means to believe in God's word and to trust in God's grace. This means, of course, that we look at even the stories of Jesus not simply as stories about Jesus, but as stories through which God is inviting us to know God's guidance and God's blessing in our own lives.

I would invite you then in this way to read with me some words that many of us heard last Sunday as we celebrated Palm Sunday. The words are Luke's account of that first Palm Sunday. As we read these words together I would invite you to think where you may have been as part of this story.

A Reading from Luke 19:29-44

Leader:

When Jesus had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, [30] saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. [31] If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.' " [32] So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. [33] As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the

colt?" [34] They said, "The Lord needs it." [35] Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. [36] As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. [37] As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, [38] saying,

People:

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

Leader:

[39] Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." [40] He answered,

People:

"I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Leader:

[41] As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, [42] saying,

People:

"If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. [43] Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. [44] They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

I would like for you to raise your hands if you have ever visited the Dominus Flevit?

As I have shared with some of you before for Rachel and myself this church was one of the surprises on our trip to Jerusalem when I was on sabbatical from my last congregation ten years ago in 2000. Not having read all of the guidebooks of Jerusalem that we should have done before we left we appreciated our tour guide leading us to this church as we followed the path that Jesus and his disciples took down the Mount of Olives on that first Palm Sunday. The church is one of the newest in Jerusalem having been built in 1955. Located on the Mount of Olives and immediately facing the Old City's magnificent panorama is this sanctuary called Dominus Flevit, which literally means, in Latin, "the Lord wept" . To symbolize what occurred on or near this site, the sanctuary was fashioned in what the architect envisaged as a teardrop. Thus the building itself serves as a poignant reminder of this story which is found only in Luke's account of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

The small compact chapel's most remarkable feature is its arch shaped picture window, purposely situated behind the altar. This window gives a stupendous view of the contemporary Old City of Jerusalem.

A mosaic picture of a hen and her chickens decorates the bottom of the altar. On it are carved the words, "For it is written: '*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.* '" (Luke 13:34).

I will pass around these pictures of this church so that you may capture some of the impression that it made on Rachel and myself. You can talk with other people who have been there about the impression that it made on them.

One writer has reminded us that the whole scene that this church tries to capture is very interesting when we remember that the Gospel writer Luke generally plays down the emotions of Jesus. To present him weeping over the city at this point is a powerful statement. Jesus weeps because he knows that the city whose name means “city of peace,” is not going to recognize the things that make for (its) peace.

The words that follow about the destruction of Jerusalem anticipate the events of A.D. 70 when in response to insurrection and violence the Romans came and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. The destruction is not seen as a divine punishment but as a consequence of the fateful choices that Jerusalem, or at least those with responsibility and power, had made.

Their choice of power soon was to be prefigured in the choice of Barabbas over Jesus before Pontius Pilate. They saw the use of force and of violent revolt to be the way to peace and well-being. As we look at our world since that time and even today how many still follow in their ways?

It was such a use of power, of course, that we see Jesus deliberately choosing to avoid as he enters Jerusalem not on a mighty war horse but on a borrowed donkey. This was the power that he had rejected in his temptations at the beginning of his ministry. He saw that his true identity was to be found not in the love of power but in the power of love.

In his Lenten study, *Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem* Michael Lindvall quotes author and Presbyterian minister Fred Buechner when he says, “Imagine a man invested with every form of human power that you can think of: the destructive power of a Hitler, the analytic power of a Freud, the creative power of a Shakespeare, the economic power of a J. Paul Getty, the moral and philanthropic power of a Schweitzer, and so on. Then try to imagine what he could do and what he could not do. He could conquer the world, very likely, but could he satisfy the deepest

longing of his own soul or your soul or mine?” Buechner answers his rhetorical question with these words: “The way God works stands in violent contrast with the power of man. It is not external like man’s power, but internal. By applying pressure,” Buechner goes on, “I can make a person do what I want him to do. This is man’s power. But as for making him be what I want him to be, without at the same time destroying his freedom, only love can make this happen.” (Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, New York: Seabury, 1983, page 33.)

This is the power of self-giving love that Jesus chose. He chose it because he saw that this was the way that led to the true peace that Jerusalem and the whole world was seeking. As we look down through the centuries we have to ask which power has really done the most good for human beings – the love of power, shown by those who rejected Jesus and his ways of peace, or the power of love that he showed forth as he entered Jerusalem and wept over that city.

The rejection Jesus experienced in Jerusalem highlights how difficult it is for human beings to appreciate the power of love. The way he was made to suffer reminds us of his words, “greater love has no one than this than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” The fact that he would not turn back even when the way of love he chose led on this week to a cross highlights not only his limitless love, but also the limitless love of God for the whole world.

As we see him hanging on the cross we find that all we can do is to be overcome with wonder, love and praise. But living as people who are grateful for the love that has been shown for us is not enough. If we claim that our true identity as the beloved children of God is to be seen in such self-giving love, and if we claim to be the followers of Jesus Christ we cannot avoid looking and asking what does it mean to be a follower of the

one who suffers and dies in this way, and who even prays from that cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” In a world where the love of power still dominates so much of life, showing forth the power of love like Jesus is still not easy. It is still not understood by those who see power and position to be used for their own ends and for their self-centered desires rather than for the good of others. It is still not appreciated by those whose concern is to look out for “number one” and to be more concerned with one’s own security and happiness and well-being than that of others.

As we come to the end of Lent we come to a conclusion that, if we are honest with ourselves, we do not want to face. How much nicer the story would be if instead of having to weep over Jerusalem Jesus and his ways of love had been welcomed with open arms. How much happier the story would be if we did not have to see Jesus rejected, and made to suffer, and hung on a cross to die. Maybe this is a horror that causes most people to stay away from the services of Holy Week. Maybe the horror of it is made worse by the way in which we see the very things that were evident in the lives of those who rejected Jesus and his way of self-giving love as the way to peace are still evident in our lives, even as we claim to be his followers. Indeed how many of us would even want to take the journey of Lent and to ask what it says about our true identity as the children of God and the followers of Jesus, if the journey ended on a cross and in a tomb? If that had been the end of the power of love, what sort of world would we know today? If that had been the end of the way of love that Jesus proclaimed in word and in deed, which one of us would want to choose that way? It is Easter and God’s affirmation of the way of suffering love as being the way of our faithful God that prompt us all still to look at our lives

and to ask, “Am I more concerned about the love of power, or about the power of love.”

If you ever get the opportunity to go to Jerusalem I hope that you will take the time to go to see the Dominus Fleuit. I also hope that it will have as much impact upon each of you as it had on Rachel and myself. The one advantage you have over us is that now you have at least heard about it before you go.

Some of these reflections are based on Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem by Michael A. Lindvall, copyright © 2007 www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com and are used by permission, and also The Hospitality of God by Brenden Byrne, S.J. The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 2000, pages 156-157.

Closing Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for this season of Lent in which we have grown and learned more about our true identity as your beloved children, and as the followers of Jesus Christ your Son. Help us to recall what we have discovered as we prepare again to enter into the victory and joy of Easter. As we remember your great faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ your Son, lead us always into greater faithfulness to you. Help us as we use the gifts and resources you have given to us for the blessing of the world, as we show forth in our own lives your power of love. We ask these things in the name of Jesus, your Son, who has ushered us into newness of life, and into new ways of living. Amen.

Closing Hymn page 15 “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

stanzas 1 and 3