



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Palm Sunday March 20, 2016

The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen

There is this minefield for preachers - one in which if we ignore what goes on in the world and our country, we are considered irrelevant. However, if we comment on what is screaming from the headlines invariably someone will stomp out in anger because there is "too much politics from the pulpit." It's a kind of preaching Catch 22. We're darned if we do and darned if we don't.

Well, Palm Sunday is the day that exposes the inherently political nature of Jesus and his ministry and by extension, ours. Jesus' disciples may have been clueless, but he was really clear about what he was doing. First you need a bit of background. At the same time that Jesus was entering Jerusalem, from the Mount of Olives, there was another procession entering the occupied city from the opposite direction. It was a parade of Roman imperial might, with snorting war horses, banners and chariots, lots of troops and leading the way on a magnificent steed - Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. It was the habit of Rome to make this entrance at the beginning of Jewish festivals, particularly Passover - under the guise of keeping the peace as thousands of religious pilgrims flooded the city often more than doubling its population. But really it was to make sure that there was no doubt of who was in charge. The military presence in the city swelled to match the faithful who had come to celebrate the liberation from slavery as told in the Passover story from the Book of Exodus.

As carefully as the Roman procession was planned, Jesus' procession was more so. Everything he did was a calculated political statement. First of all, Jesus knew his Bible, particularly the stories of David and the voice of the prophets. His favorite on this day was Zechariah who identified the Mount of Olives as the place from which God's deliverance will come. And how will this deliverance come? Why, the king riding on a donkey. Donkeys actually play an interesting part in the history of the kings of Israel. First mentioned in Genesis, then in the calling of Saul to be the first king. Then Solomon, newly named heir to the throne, enters Jerusalem riding his father David's donkey. And of course, there is the donkey that Mary rode to Bethlehem, the city of David to give birth to the newborn king. And now back to Zechariah, "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..."

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The presence of the donkey gives us a clue to the tension of the day and to the values of two different kingdoms. This lowly little animal is an animal of peace. The horse is an animal of war. Pilate came to "keep the peace" with power. Jesus came to be peace and to usher in the reign of peace which would benefit all. Pilate's peace was only good for the rich and the favored. As you can see, the stakes were high on that day. This was deadly serious political theater. Jesus gave us a model for speaking truth to power. It is not for the faint-hearted. It is dangerous. Those who try it are assaulted, have dogs and fire hoses turned on them. They are often killed. Unfortunately for us, the inheritors of Jesus ministry, it is the work into which we are sometimes drawn.

It is the work to which we are called when public voices begin to advocate violence against others. To serve God's kingdom is to stand against that which promotes violence, hatred, inequality, and prejudice. If we will not stand up and say, hatred and violence are not God's way, who will? The voices of hatred and violence must be exposed and the message rejected, if we don't do that, how can we claim to follow Jesus and say that we believe in him? Jesus' life and ministry described and showed us what God's kingdom will look like. It is the mission of the church to hold up the image of God's kingdom - the peaceable, just, and loving kingdom - so that degrading, hate-filled speech and violence are exposed for what they are. We are asked to choose.

The bishops of the Episcopal Church gathered this past week and discussed with great concern the deteriorating public and political rhetoric and the growing violence directed toward different minority groups. They asked that this statement be read in every Episcopal church today.

*"On Good Friday the ruling political forces of the day tortured and executed an innocent man. They sacrificed the weak and the blameless to protect their own status and power. On the third day Jesus was raised from the dead, revealing not only their injustice but also unmasking the lie that might makes right.*

*In a country still living under the shadow of the lynching tree, we are troubled by the violent forces being released by this season's political rhetoric. Americans are turning against their neighbors, particularly those on the margins of society. They seek to secure their own safety and security at the expense of others. There is legitimate reason to fear where this rhetoric and the actions arising from it might take us.*

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*In this moment, we resemble God's children wandering in the wilderness. We, like they, are struggling to find our way. They turned from following God and worshiped a golden calf constructed from their own wealth. The current rhetoric is leading us to construct a modern false idol out of power and privilege. We reject the idolatrous notion that we can ensure the safety of some by sacrificing the hopes of others. No matter where we fall on the political spectrum, we must respect the dignity of every human being and we must seek the common good above all else. We call for prayer for our country that a spirit of reconciliation will prevail and we will not betray our true selves.*

There are many who are deeply troubled by what we are seeing in the political arena. There are many who are speaking out. If the church is not among them, if we are not among them then we had better ask ourselves if we are looking for a warhorse to make us feel safe or a humble little donkey that will lead us into the paths of true peace. I pray that you think on that during this holy week.

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