

Along the track

Palm Sunday

The significance of Palm Sunday is often forgotten. It is all about fear. Jesus of Nazareth, this itinerant preacher from nowhere arrived at the gates of Jerusalem in a parody of imperial pomp. Instead of a stallion, he rode up on a borrowed donkey. In place of an army, he had a bunch of people throwing down their cloaks and palm branches as if he was someone important. And he was.

He came armed with an idea, a vision of what might be, a vision where all people would be treated fairly, with justice and compassion, no matter who they were. Love one another, he said. And we often repeat that and sing about it but.....?

Those in power didn't like that. They were afraid of losing their power, losing what they had built up, losing those who followed them and kept them in power. They were the ones who spoke to God for us. Perhaps they were quite genuine in that belief. It had stood them well. So they started a whispering campaign. No matter how appealing his message may be, it is dangerous, not 'our' way of doing things. A week later he was dead. Fear took hold.

His followers called his idea 'The Way' and many of us today still try to follow The Way but have we too now become afraid, terrified of losing what we have built up, the security, the wealth, the comfort, the freedom, the privileges of living in such a country as ours? Is the Way now too challenging, not for our times?

That's what started on Palm Sunday – the leaders decided that they had too much to lose so they cultivated an atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Be careful of him – we could lose everything. He is challenging what we hold dear, what we believe. He will upset the Romans. A week later the same people who welcomed him hardened their hearts and now called for his execution.

Have we too become afraid? Even worse, have we hardened our hearts against our fellow Australians who are poor and powerless and, therefore, somehow troublesome, embarrassing. Clear the homeless off the streets, keep those who are mentally challenged out of sight, keep the protestors off the streets, keep those who we find we may disagree with out of sight.

Are we afraid of those who come seeking refuge here, people displaced by war and persecution. And their traumatised children. Why? Who told us to fear them? We don't know them or their circumstances. We hide them away and make them faceless.

In his Palm Sunday article, author Tim Winton wrote:

*Australians have gradually let themselves be convinced that asylum seekers have brought their suffering and persecution and homelessness and poverty on themselves. Our leaders have taught us we need to harden our hearts against them ... **

Are we happy about that? Are we content to believe the stories that are spun, the commentators who stoke our fear and uncertainty? Palm Sunday reminds us to ask ourselves what we fear. Do we listen to those who promote fear or to those who promote The Way Jesus taught which asks us to walk the journey of faith with one another and with those entrusted to our care, especially those who are the most vulnerable. He asked us to love one another, to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to be compassionate., to feed the hungry, to care for the lonely, those who are suffering, those who are poor.

On this Palm Sunday we might ask ourselves whether we feel our country still stands out as a welcoming place with a strong sense of decency, fairness, justice, compassion and openness or, like in the Palm Sunday we commemorate, are we succumbing to irrational fear and letting it take hold? We sometimes hear the lament that we are no longer a Christian nation but Christianity is not just a set of beliefs. It is a way of living. Jesus showed us how. Do our fellow Australians know what we stand for?

*Tim Winton's speech at the Palm Sunday Walk for Justice4Refugees in Perth.

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au