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PALM SUNDAY HERO

Pastor John Henderson

In 2008 Pope Benedict XVI visited Australia. Because of my position at the time I was invited to several events in Sydney. As I approached the venues I was struck by the high level of security – cordons, fences, guards, police and surveillance. Most of Hyde Park was off limits to the public, and St Mary’s Cathedral was encased in several layers of fencing. You could only get in if you had an official invitation.

This type of thing is necessary today because of tensions and dangers in modern society, but it seems so different from the way it all began. In his day Jesus was alone, with a handful of followers. They moved through public places unguarded, available to anyone. Two thousand years later he has over 2 billion followers spread throughout the world. There has never been any group of believers on that scale in the history of the world.

All the same, these days many Christians are down on themselves. They feel they have failed to live up to the promise of Christianity given in Jesus’ message of love and peace. Human nature is still the same. Anger, hatred, violence, greed, and war, have all continued, sometimes in the name of religion. Is it our fault? Is the church to blame? Is God to blame?

Perhaps it’s just human nature to dwell on the negatives. In the old ‘glass half empty’ way, we easily forget the loving, peaceful, patient, caring, and community based things that are also found in countless places, and in countless relationships. The world is a mixed place of good, as well as bad, of blessing as well as curse. It can be as plain as black and white, or it can be as subtle as learning to change your perspective, the way you look at things.

The way people looked at things back when Jesus walked into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday was to say, ‘Here’s our hero.’ In a black and white view of the world everything that God had said would now come true because Jesus had arrived. But they were impatient, or perhaps they just quickly tired of their new hero. From the beginning Jesus knew the betrayal that was in their hearts. God is a student of the heart – it’s what interests him most. What goes on inside, in our private, inner conversation with ourselves, is the most human part of us. Violence and anger come from the inside, as do love, peace, and justice.

There were no security guards, and no fences, for Jesus. He was at the mercy of the crowd. He would soon have to endure the violence and anger that consumed them. The confusion and hostility of the human race culminates in Jesus' death. As we try to deal with a world gone wrong and a destiny of which we have been cheated, the question of who to blame is often the first thing we ask when something goes wrong. We might sometimes blame others, or ourselves, but somehow, down the line, God is always in the firing line.

Unlike us, God doesn't duck for cover. Against all expectations God stays right in the middle of our sights as we look for someone, or something, to shoot down. Christians do not know a God who is unapproachable, who stays locked in a room, coming out only on special occasions. They walk and talk with a God who joins them in the risk and adventure of life. Our ups and downs are God's ups and downs. God joins in our bewilderment, and flashes of joy, our slump of depression, pain, and even our anger. Where we are, God is – not behind a security fence, but right here.

Somehow, in knowing a God like that, the world becomes a better place. Life is made better. We become better. Our problems might still be the same, but the way we see them changes. We learn new answers. Since life begins on the inside, real change also begins inside us. If we aren't healed there, no amount of other stuff will fix things up.

What is true for us is also true for our world. It's no good waiting for someone else to do it. The cure for the violence and anger of the world lies with the millions of small steps individuals can make every day. That's how God works. We know it because it's how Jesus worked. Small steps, every day, but all lined up to one final goal.

The contrast between Jesus in his day with just a few followers, and the billions of Christians alive today is not really all that great. God's gift does not lie in the numbers, but in the heart.

The story of our heart is told in the story of Jesus. In the story of the gospels, as he approached Jerusalem to the shouting of the crowd, he paused to weep over the city and its people. He was not impressed by external appearances and shows of strength, and those things did not change him. He wept because the people's hearts weren't in it. But that didn't stop him either. Jesus doesn't just love the loveable. He loves the unlovable, when there is no reward to be gained.

In our hearts we know that we do not deserve that love, because we know who we are, what we think and what we do. The crowds who welcomed Jesus said they loved him, but they did not. They were only interested in themselves. Where we might respond with disappointment and resentment, he responded with tears and determination to see his love through to the end.

This is also our story because it is still happening. There is an old image of Jesus standing at the door of our hearts and knocking, and there's a lot of truth in it. Patiently he waits. He will not barge in and tear things down and destroy them. He works with us, he teaches us to love, and he becomes our friend.

You might not see huge crowds going to church on Palm Sunday. To most Australians it will be a day like any other day. That doesn't mean it's all over, and that God has given up. God has no more given up on us than Jesus gave up on Jerusalem. God is in this with us to the end, and Jesus is with you, to the end, one on one, and one with billions of others to whom he has also offered the gift of life.