

A Green-er Day?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 24 March 2024

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Palm Sunday

**Contemporary Reading: *Transformation* by Anna Kamienska;
Philippians 2: 5-11; Dramatic Rendering of Mark 11: 1-11**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Let's think about three things – about greenery, about the Sydney Greenway, and about Hildegard's Latin word '*viriditas*', meaning greenness or verdancy, that informed our recent entry in the Mardi Gras parade. And let's keep in the back of our minds a couple of questions:

- what connects Jesus's entry into Jerusalem with Extinction Rebellion? and
- what might Hildegard and the Greenway have to say to the vibrancy and future of the church in our own time?

Let's go back a bit. First let's remember that the gospel writers, and especially Mark, belonged to a time before Constantine – a time when the church was a tiny minority sect emerging out of Judaism, itself a minority. The early followers of Jesus were a motley crew of dissidents. They did not walk the corridors of power.

We still tend to read this text from the standpoint of being the Christian majority. Some of 'our people' still do walk the corridors of power, though increasingly this is not the case. We still read this story as a 'triumphal entry' – a form of coronation procession.

Yes, we claim that Jesus 'kingship' was of a very different order – but we still tend to read it as though we belong to the group that is in charge. Whereas in reality Jesus and their followers were precisely not in charge, and in so far as they irritated those who were, they were likely to be stamped on. Which is effectively what happened on what we now call Good Friday.

But we may wish to question whether our largely unconscious post-Constantinian bias any longer serves us in an era when the church is again a minority that is not 'in charge'.

Let's also go back – not so far – to about twenty years ago when the eminent Biblical scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg in their book *The Last Week* pointed out the political contrast of the two processions occurring on the supposed original Palm Sunday. For while Jesus and his little gaggle make their entry through the north gate of the city, through the great west gate marched Pontius Pilate in his annual display of force, designed to intimidate those gathering in large numbers in Jerusalem for the Passover into setting aside any ideas they might have of rebellion. This is how Crossan and Borg describe that procession.

“A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather, armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.”

This was a display of power, of empire – the equivalent of a presidential cavalcade or a Victory Day parade in Red Square. It was a magnificent act of theatre on the grand scale. And we know that the church down the ages has lent itself to just such displays of power and propaganda and allied itself with the victors’ side.

But what was going on at the north end of town? Something also involving preparation. There is nothing in Mark’s account to suggest a spontaneous happening. Thought went into this event and pre-arrangement with the owner of the previously unriden – and therefore probably very erratic – donkey; and with those who brought already pre-cut greenery (just as we have prepared greenery today) ready for this little bit of provocative street theatre.

This was an agit prop demonstration – combining agitation with propaganda to try and stir up socio-political action and transformation. Was it dangerous? Definitely. Is it worthy of emulation in certain circumstances? Of course. But we have to realise what we’re getting into.

Extinction Rebellion are one example of a group using agit prop methods to convey their message in visually striking and impactful ways, whether by street theatre, die-ins, artistic displays and symbols or tactics of disruption. We provided them hospitality here at Pitt St because they share some of our core values around the primacy of care for the environment. We had some questions about their methods and some limits to what we felt comfortable allowing. Yet surely Jesus followers on Palm Sunday are much closer to an Extinction Rebellion group than they are to any of our regular respectable congregations. As church we have to ask ourselves *‘are we allied with empire, with government and are we often unknowing pawns of big corporations and economic forces; or are we genuinely seeking an alternative way?’*

Now that scares me a bit as it may you – I, like I suspect most of you, was brought up to be a good child who obeyed what the nice police officer said – and of course, many of them are very nice and do a wonderful job. But true Christianity has never been about niceness, comfort, or ease. It has not been about supporting the status quo. It has been about liberation and transformation. It has been about finding another way and refusing to accept any rhetoric that suggests there is no alternative.

Which brings me to greenery, the Greenway and viriditas. Mark’s gospel talks about greenery cut from the fields and Matthew about branches of trees. Luke has no greenery only cloaks - anyone for ‘Cloak Sunday’? Or more properly ‘Garment Sunday’, conjuring shades of teenage fans hurling all kinds of apparel at their pop idols! They are of course a reference back – as so often in Luke – to the coronation of King Jehu in 2 Kings, but maybe we’ll stick to greenery. Only in the later gospel of John do we find palms – the victor’s frond of classical Greece and Rome – signalling perhaps the rising respectability and influence of the Jesus movement.

It’s a detail, and certainly not one to push too hard, but it seems as though Mark is interested in the greenery not as an alternative victor’s laurel, but as the symbol of new life, and of the connection that Jesus had with country (in a sense close to that we would understand from our Aboriginal siblings) – an understanding which pours out in his parables.

The greenery is not about declaring the victory march of a new kind of king, so much as the possibilities of a future where those living close to the land might receive the due rewards of their labour. It represents the cry of the land and those associated with it, in defiance of those who had come with superior force and occupying power. Rather than collusion with empire, it signifies connection between the people and the land, even in the relatively urbanised landscape of Jerusalem under Roman occupation.

Here in twenty-first century Sydney, we recognise the grip of empire everywhere around us – whether the stains of British colonialism, the presence of a US naval vessel in the harbour, or the ubiquitous influence of Google and Facebook.

We are never far from empire and this sits oddly with those of us whose Christian faith springs from the fertile soil of opposition to empire and connection to land as exemplified by the Celtic saints Jo brought to us last week.

Connection to land is not easy in the city, but the importance of a different way is beginning to be seen even in the face of much opposition from urban developers. Which brings me, as an image, to the Sydney Greenway – a project seeking to transform disused rail corridors of the Inner West into a green ribbon linking parks, walking trails and cycle tracks re-connecting communities along its length to land and waterways. This project has its inevitable detractors and is far from environmentally perfect. Yet in a small way it speaks to the possibilities of transformation in our own environment. It maps an alternative – a people's path of greenery like a Palm Sunday procession; a green ribbon like those we waved in the Mardi Gras parade. It follows the trajectory of Jesus and his rag, tag mob of outcasts riding a wobbly course into town on a donkey, strewing greenery as they go - nothing big in the scale of things; some would say hardly worth it; yet it matters because it keeps the possibility of a different path alive.

Which brings me finally to Viriditas – spiritual greenness as Hildegard defined it. Those of you who have endured the long dark winters of the northern hemisphere, will recognise the surge of hope that lifts the human spirit on seeing the first vivid blades of green poking through a snow-covered landscape that signal the coming of spring. For Hildegard this was the symbol of divine life-force and of transformation not just in the material world but also the spiritual. The sight of greenery, as we have here today, points to future hope and the possibility of the new life that will come as we pass through the pascal mystery of dying and rising in the coming days.

The little gaggle that walked in our bright viriditas green in the Mardi Gras parade this year, to the beat of the young Leichardt drummers represented all of this – a little ribbon of green amid the rainbows and the glitz.

Hope – for the church and its organic renewal, in ways that are small and sustainable and connect us to people and land. Hope - for the world that there are other, simpler ways of being and celebrating. Hope – for ourselves that the divine life-force springs still fresh among us.

We were a little band – we're a little band here today – but make no mistake, viriditas is powerful; transformation is possible and while there is one blade of green raised in acknowledgment of a loving God, there is hope for the world this Palm Sunday and forever.

Amen