

Liberation is a Journey

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 13 April 2025

A Reflection by Rev Vladimir Korotkov

Palm Sunday

Luke 19: 28-40

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

Introduction

The events of Palm Sunday occur in the beginning of Passover Week, when many Jewish pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem from across the world to remember their ancestors who were slaves in Egypt. ... and the ancient Israelites cried out for liberation and freedom. The Passover was an opportunity to recollect how Moses led them from Egypt into a new land and new life; and how Yahweh, their God, accompanied them.

In the 1st century, this story of liberation was a story of hope, faith and courage for Jewish people who again longed for a new freedom from the tyranny and harshness of the colonisation and domination of Rome. So, in our Palm Sunday story, Marcus Borg and John Crossan inform us that:

there were two processions [moving towards] Jerusalem It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year... One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives ... On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers ... Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology.ⁱ

While the Lukan reading has only the followers of Jesus giving grateful voice to the liberating ministry of Jesus, all the other Gospel writers note that the crowds shouted "hosanna" which is an Aramaic phrase meaning, "Save us, we pray." The people cried out for liberation. As people still cry out for liberation today.

1. What does liberation mean?

The promise of the liberation of Europe at the end of WW2 was short-lived. My Ukrainian mother emerged in Salzburg, Austria, from the dust of the war and was fortunate to be in the American sector. Cities and nations in the war regions of Europe were carved up into four areas, with British, French, American and Soviet sectors. Every Soviet person who was in a Soviet sector was sent back as a traitor and were sent to Gulags.

My mother's life-story is a historical example of the fluidity and contradictory nature of freedom and liberation, especially of oppressed and colonised people.

The Soviet dream of freedom and liberty for all began with great ambitions similar to the revolutionaries in France who made *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* their core watchwords. Both dreams were short-lived.

But to achieve freedom and liberty those in power in the Soviet Union decided that force was needed to change society. To recolonise, to standardise society, the culture, the economy and the inner mind.

Before my mother was born in the 1920s, her father, who was Jewish, was sent to a Gulag. In 1932-33 during the Ukrainian famine – caused by the Soviet economy policy - millions died,ⁱⁱ and my mother watched her mother die. All her siblings had died. She was orphaned around the age of 8 or 9.

When the Nazi's occupied all of Ukraine by November 1941 they realised that they needed to find workers to replace the 3 million soldiers fighting in the Soviet war. So, they deported young people back to Germany or Austria as forced labour. My mother as a teenager was deported. There were between 10 and 13 million workers taken, mostly women.ⁱⁱⁱ Throughout her life, my mother shared very little of this colonising, traumatic experience.

So, when she emerged in Salzburg at the end of WW2, she was one of those who survived a range of brutal and traumatic historical experiences. Now, she was a displaced person, but she was finally liberated from being a forced labourer.

But the fluctuations and contradictions of liberation were to persist for most of her life.

While waiting to find a host nation, she found herself trapped in a loveless relationship with my father. In Australia, as a poor migrant family, we lived with domestic violence and faced the racism of the 50s and 60s.

2. Liberation means developing a capacity for reflection and meaning

Brutal and historical experiences involve social, cultural, economic, political, psychic and spiritual dimensions. They can impede us from fully experiencing life, the divine Presence, and our own selves. They can create an alienated identity and meaning system. We can be alienated from ourselves, our body, our feelings, others and our mind.

Franz Fanon, a French West Indian psychiatrist and political philosopher, and who supported the Algerian War of independence from France, offers insights into the debilitating alienation of colonisation. Observing the effects and affects of colonisation on himself and his people, Fanon writes "*the black man is not a man*". In the colonial logic, the colonised can not create their own meaning, "*The colonial values deny the black man not just ... individuality but also ... humanity.*"^{iv}

Howard McGary explains:

alienation particular to oppression is self-alienation and not just alienation from work or from life but from a positive sense of self.^v

Kelly Oliver in her book, *The colonisation of psychic space*, further notes:

oppression, especially racist and sexist oppression, denigrates and abjects people in an attempt to deny a positive self. It is not just that the sense of self is distorted from human to animal or base pleasures, but that the sense of self is abjected as bad, evil or contaminated.^{vi}

In the few years before the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Nazi regime prepared their soldiers for the encounter with Soviet people. They created perverse propaganda about the inferior and debased nature of Soviet people. This was to build the capacity of soldiers to see them as enemies, to kill and exterminate them. There was even a plan to sterilise women and allow the Soviet peoples to die out. So, this was an attempt to abject a whole people, as contaminated, base and like animals.^{vii}

And so, Oliver importantly notes:

"The struggle to liberate psychic space from colonisation [abjection] hinges on the ... ability [of the colonised] to make meaning for oneself."^{viii}

And this liberation process can take a lifetime.

I observed that there was always a deep spiritual desire that stirred my mother, even in the most difficult of times. The world was not a safe place, but she sensed the Presence of God in her life. She sought out various religious groups, but in the end developed her own monastic practice. We had a market garden and would need to rise at 4am to beat the morning sun. She would wake up each morning at 3am and read the scriptures and pray. So over time through the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Psalms, the story of Jesus, she was able to remake her own meaning and fashion a new self. She created her own theology, and we disagreed on many things, but it worked for her.

3. The liberation of the Jesus story

Mari Ruti has been a key influence in my life. She was a teacher of critical theory, psychoanalysis, and gender and queer theory. In her book *Reinventing the soul: posthumanist theory and psychic life*, she notes that our social symbolic world can be composed of stories and truths that are harmful fictions. She has worked on deconstructive efforts to expose stories *"that maintain fixed and wounding conventions, not only of gender and sexuality, but also, class, race, and ethnicity."*^{ix} And she follows Fredrich Nietzsche and Roland Barthes not only to deconstruct harmful stories, but to create new stories that possess the power to shape our realities with the potential to radically restructure these realities.

For us, this is the story of Jesus.

Last week's reading of John 11 and 12, critically interpreted, offers us a powerful image of liberty, freedom, equality and solidarity and belonging. The family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus are symbolic of being the new people of the divine Presence on the way to the cross and resurrection. A social space, where there is death in life. Lazarus has died. All are impacted, Mary and Martha and the community around them, they all grieve, express sadness. And in solidarity with them, Jesus arrives, is deeply moved in body and being, grieves, supports. Jesus, in prayer, alerts the community that they all live in a greater reality, aware of death in life, participating with us in our realities, the Divine Presence.

As Richard Rohr writes in *Everything Belongs*, that we live in Presence and are invited to live in awareness of the Presence.^x And then, in John 12, as Jesus is aware of his own death in life, Mary represents our moving in solidarity with Jesus as she pours oil on his feet. We, like Mary, are invited to live in solidarity with Divine life, in genuine compassion and collaboration, seeking life in death. And in John 15:15, Jesus creates a new metaphor, we are no longer his servants, but his friends.

Conclusion

When I was 19, I left home, Adelaide, and went to theological college in Sydney. My mother, sister and brother, and their little dog, walked out of our poor fibro house, left my father, and moved into her new home.

One day, when she was into her 70's, I stood next to her in the kitchen of her own home and we looked out over her garden, the chickens and the sunshine. *O Vova*, she said with such elation, *how wonderful life is*. As I looked at her overjoyed face, I could sense that in her later life, she had finally found freedom, liberation, forgiveness and a softness that was not always there.

Hers was a journey full of contradictions and one liberation and challenge after another, but she finally found her peace and contentment, her liberation.

In her liberation was our liberation.

ⁱ Cited in: <https://www.onemansweb.org/theology/the-year-of-luke-2016/which-parade-luke-19-28-40.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Holodomor>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine/The-Nazi-occupation-of-Soviet-Ukraine>

^{iv} Kelly Oliver, *The Colonisation of Psychic space: A psychoanalytic social theory of oppression*, p14.

^v Ibid, p12

^{vi} Ibid, p13.

^{vii} <https://www.historytools.org/stories/operation-barbarossa-hitlers-fateful-decision-to-invade-the-soviet-union>

^{viii} Kelly Oliver, p15

^{ix} Mari Ruti, *Reinventing the soul: posthumanist theory and psychic life*, p51.

^x Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, p31.