

Palm Sunday 2007

I received a thought-provoking e-mail the other day. It came from a clergy colleague with whom I am working to find ways to reach out to young adults on the Peninsula—to begin to open a conversation between the established church and younger adults in our area who do not attend church.

In our dialogue, this is what my friend wrote to me.

“The church has become like a fortress that gets more and more formidable and distant and strange to society at large. The only impressions most people (& certainly the young) have of the church are formed by the media, by newspaper headlines (usually about scandals), and televangelists they see on late-night television. The moat around that fortress gets larger and deeper with each generation. It seems the rejection of “ is getting hard-wired into the DNA of youth culture.”

Those words reminded me of the problem that classical musicians face. Fewer and fewer people go to classical music concerts. So, at the Grammys you’ll see Yo Yo Ma playing with Sting, or the London Symphony Orchestra with Coldplay. The thinking goes that exposure to a great cellist or symphony orchestra through someone they already know and whose music they enjoy may break down the barriers that separate many in the wider public from classical musicians.

And that may be. Maybe when Yo Yo Ma plays a concert in their town, people who don't listen to classical music will remember his name from the Grammys and might feel comfortable enough to attend.

You see, the reason that effort is being made—and, why I believe it works—is that we live in an age when perspectives and expectations are constantly being challenged. Within one person's lifetime we have, over the last century, seen humanity go from the horse and buggy to rovers on Mars. Technology has given rise to all sorts of changes in culture, in human expectations, and in our perception of the world. I am still amazed that at the young age of 43 I have seen things disappear that were commonplace in my childhood (rotary dial phones, record players that played vinyl records, typewriters). All these things have disappeared and been replaced with something new. And in some cases, the things that replaced them have themselves been replaced. How many people do you know, for example, who not only don't have a rotary dial phone, but don't even have a phone that plugs into the wall, because the only phone they use is a cell phone. We all know that change is inevitable. But knowing that doesn't make it any less difficult to get a handle on it. That's the challenge for those of us on the other side of the organized religion equation. We're not sure that we want church to change and yet we know that, like everything else, it must—otherwise we risk becoming irrelevant to those who come after us. But then, that has happened to the church before, hasn't it?

Today being Palm Sunday—we are commemorating Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The people of Jerusalem at that time sang out in praise and thanksgiving for change; in their case, a change of Kingship. Luke's gospel is very clear in making this point; the people saw Jesus coming as a king who would lay claim on Jerusalem. And so His disciples cried out; **"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"** Jesus was going to free them from Roman rule!

But those followers of Jesus had no idea what kind of change they were really in for! Because Jesus wasn't about to be the kind of king that most people were either expecting or hoping for. They were ready for change, but only the kind of change that they expected (and hoped) would happen.

And it makes me wonder—Is this true about changes in other periods of history? Is it even possible to take ourselves out of the contexts in which we live and have an objective view of what is happening in the world around us? That's pretty challenging. It means letting go of our sense of control and opening ourselves up to new possibilities. It also means trusting in God—perhaps more than we have or are even willing to trust God now.

When Christianity started spreading around the Roman world in the years after the church began, do you think people went around saying; Oh wow, have you heard about this great new religion that is popular among slaves and women, it's changing everything? Or when the Roman Catholic priests, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the other Reformers began to question the corruption and teachings of the church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, do you think anyone realized at the time what was happening?

Well, the same goes for today. When young people say they are searching for a spirituality that speaks to their experience of the world and they are searching for a church that responds to that world in a way that feels genuine to them do we pay attention? Do we take their questions seriously? Or do we write them off as ill-informed and "unchurched?"

What worries me is that I don't know if we really realize what is happening around us today. Do we spend any time thinking about what the world might say a century from now about organized religion in our time? Will they say it was regrettable for us that we didn't pay more attention to what was going on in our own time? Might people, in fact, say in that day "boy, I wish I could have lived during the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What an exciting time for religion that was!

The more I think about it, the more I have come to believe that in the context of where we are today, it really behooves us to think about the experience of those people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem that day. They could not possibly have had any idea that by the end of the week he would be hanging on a cross.

So, for those who lived that experience and lived through the radical changes it brought in their lives, how did they make their way through it?

You see, even if we can't predict what the church is going to be like in the next 20 or 50 years, it would be wise for us to remain open to the changes taking place in our midst. Because with God, what appears at one time small by the world's standards can signal cosmic changes for the future.

Perhaps this is something we are re-learning today. Perhaps my friend is right. Perhaps the glory days of Christianity as we knew it in our culture are gone. The Christianity we have known has done great things—it has brought the faith to people around the globe, teaching them that heaven is not something that we seek, but instead that heaven is all around us in God's creation and that in fact, it is God who continues to seek US.

The Christianity of we have known has taught people that there is a God willing to go to any length to be in relationship with us. It has taught us the importance of peace and integrity and compassion and so many wonderful things. But today, so

many in our society see that same Christianity as irrelevant to the world in which we live. Because to many of the young, a God who requires the blood sacrifice of his son does not make sense. In fact what they see instead is people killing each other in the name of religion. For the young, a God that would choose to reveal himself in only one way to only one group of people and in a religion that insists that it is the only way to God does not make sense. What they see is a world of plurality. A world in which different religions hold many “truths” that help people a great deal in their spiritual quests.

Does this mean that Christianity as we have known it is irrelevant to the young of today? Absolutely not! Because other parts of Christianity that perhaps have not been the highlight of the organized church DO speak to them.

For many today, a religion that calls everyone to live justly and to respect the dignity of every human being is a religion that speaks to their hearts. For many a God who can be understood through stories about a rotten son who, just the same, is welcomed home by his father with love, forgiveness and a banquet; or about how an enemy Samaritan is the one who helped someone in need rather than a priest, speaks powerfully to their souls. The stories that Jesus told can speak powerfully to us today because they are about real, understandable human experiences. Experiences that will speak to our young people—if only “the church” will get out of the way of the message.

I say let the Holy Spirit do its work in people. Let people's real life experiences inform their interpretation of those stories. Let them wrestle with their meaning without telling them which interpretations are "wrong" or "right." After all how do we really know that we're the ones who are right?

So much of our faith tradition finds challenges in the day-to-day experiences of people (young and old) in our world today. But the Good News that Jesus lived and died to deliver to us is still there. In that context, I can look back at the irony of today's text; of the triumphant entry of the King of all creation on a donkey, I can look at that as a very comforting thought for our time. Because if the ruler of the universe can fulfill His mission riding on a borrowed donkey, and if the ruler of the universe gave up all on the cross and still triumphed as the one who rose from an empty tomb—

if that is how the glory of God expresses itself in its fullness, then perhaps we need not fear changes in the role and status and mission of the church in our society today.

In fact, might we not even thank God that we can glimpse a new thing happening; and perhaps thank God that even amid the struggles, that we are not part of a dying church, but rather are part of Christ doing a new thing in the world?

Listen, with your heart. This Palm Sunday . . . this Holy Week . . . amid all the fear of losing things that have been dear to us in the past, let us listen for God speaking to us through those who may not be among us. Because perhaps there is a new song being sung—a song that is even still pleasing to the ears of our crucified king. Amen.