



Pacific Conference of Churches

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EASTER MESSAGE

Warm greetings from the Pacific Conference of Churches' Secretariat.

As we approach Good Friday and Easter Sunday; as we commemorate the sacrificial redemptive act of Jesus on behalf of the whole cosmos and the celebration of his resurrection, ensuring life not death and love not hate nor fear has the final say; let us reflect on the how Jesus continues to call us as leaders of the Churches in the Pacific to follow a radicalism of love which dispels the division of the sacred and the secular that attempts to place the practice of love of God, neighbour, creation and oneself in a silo of purely individual faith.

In this His last week of ministry, the week of both triumphant entry and condemnation to death by mob mentality, Jesus encounters and challenges the state which rules by might and intimidation, self-serving religious leaders who seek to maintain the status quo of their authority while betraying the foundational values of their faith, the traditional aristocracy who are only concerned with their own position and comfort, and also a people so disempowered, that all they can cry is "Hoshiana!" (Hosanna!) "Please Save!" Recalling the previous entry into Jerusalem by Simon Maccabeus in 142BCE The crowd misinterpreted him, as so many others did, expecting Jesus to establish the kingdom of David rather than the kingdom of God.

Travelling from Caesarea Maritima, Pilate paraded into Jerusalem on the first day of Passover Week, entering the west gate with legions of chariots, horses, and foot soldiers, dressed for battle and armed with swords and spears. This show of force was to ensure that Rome's authority would not be questioned. Pilate's procession was meant to inspire awe and fear, respect and obedience.

On the opposite side of the city, starting at the East Gate, also known as the Golden Gate or the Gate of Mercy, a different procession began. Just as carefully staged as Pilate's entry into Jerusalem, this procession offered a different vision of what a Kingdom should be. Jesus' humble, yet triumphal, entry into Jerusalem stood in contrast to the magnificence and brutality on display at the opposite end of the city. Pilate brings a sword. Jesus brings peace.

Jesus confronted the power of empire in his entry procession into Jerusalem. In the words of Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg ("The Last Week"-2007):

Jesus's procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus's procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God. This contrast—between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar—is central not only to the gospel of Mark, but to the story of Jesus and early Christianity. The confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus's life. As we all know, the week ends with Jesus's execution by the powers who ruled his world. Holy Week is the story of this confrontation.

In these two regal entrances we have before us two very different kingdoms: the Kingdom of Rome that proclaimed Caesar to be the son of the gods and the bringer of peace, a triumph of propaganda given this peace was forged with an army, maintained by the slaughter of any who opposed, and

conducted in such a way that people who were already poor were stripped of their wealth in order to feed the insatiable greed of Rome. Over against this stood the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus, with a completely different set of values. In the Kingdom of God love not power lay at the centre; to be great was to be concerned with the least and to serve the interests of others; its inhabitants were called to love their enemies, pray for those who persecuted them, forgive each other's debts, and share what they had with one another.

The same choices lie before us today. Will I surrender to the values of the world around me, or will I surrender to the values of the kingdom of God?

Jesus challenged not only the power of dominion, he also challenged the Jewish religious leaders who worked closely with Rome in a delicate balance to keep the citizenry compliant while maintaining their own wealth and power. They had become a part of a corrupt system that perpetuated itself. The same witness to Jesus that disturbs the leaders might have instead encouraged them to reconsider their rejection of Jesus and come to him for life. But they continue in their hardened position against Jesus, rejecting his love for them.

The same choices lie before us today. Will I surrender to the values of the world around me, or will I surrender to the values of the kingdom of God? Will I remain comfortable in my complicity with the values of the world or will I reject these values to embrace the values that ensure life in abundance for all?

Yet as we know, the shouts of "Blessed is the King" became cries of "Crucify him!" Standing against the powers of this world is a good way to get killed. The disciples may not have expected the outcome of this week to be a cross, but there is some hint that Jesus did. As he approached the city, sitting on that donkey, listening to the adulation, Jesus was crying over Jerusalem. He knew the crowd did not recognize what passed before them; and he knew the fragile relationship they kept with Rome would ultimately crush them all.

As leaders of the Church in the Pacific, we must always remember that God's prophets, more often than not, have to pay the ultimate price for speaking truth, in love to power. Jesus knew what the cost of being the Way, the Truth and the Life was. He knew what awaited him for embodying the Word of God to those who worshiped power and money and used force and manipulated religion to achieve their agendas. Still he came. Still he stood. And still he sacrificed himself for peace.

We can talk about those suffering from Climate Change, we can express sympathy for the poor, we can express solidarity with those who suffer discrimination. We can engage in advocacy and pastoral care. There will be some point, however, when following the Christ will mean standing against the west-gate parade without the benefit of swords or armour. We are called to be disciples, standing for what Jesus stands for – welcoming the stranger, healing the sick, making people whole again – even the ones we don't like, even the ones who scare us. The dominion of God is nothing remotely like the kingdoms or empires with which we are all too familiar. Power does not come from domination or oppression, but rather flows from love and service. Leadership requires servanthood and grace. Peace is won without sword, and person claims greater value than another. This is shalom. This is peace – whose only path is through the gate of mercy and on to the cross.

Fortunately, it is also the path to resurrection.

May this Easter give us the courage to confront those who oppress, whomever and wherever they may be in our society and may we gain the courage to love as radically as Jesus did.

Rev. James Bhagwan
General Secretary