

# Stepping into Holy Week

March 20, 2005 – Palm Sunday

You have heard it said:

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

A step is a small thing, but it may be significant  
in what it represents,  
in the direction it sets,  
in the destination it envisions,  
in the way - the manner of living it undertakes.

So it was with Jesus when he entered Jerusalem  
in those days leading up to what we call Holy Week.  
Lots of people enter Jerusalem every day, but this entry was different.  
It represented the arrival of a king.  
It set a direction, a way and a destination.  
The steps into the city were the beginning of the journey to the cross.

In our lives, we all have taken steps  
that we look back on as significant.  
I remember climbing on a big yellow school bus in the rain my first day of school  
not realizing that much of my life would be spent studying and learning.  
You may remember stepping into an airplane for the first time,  
ready to fly away to a place you had never been before,  
with the excitement and nervousness of the unknown ahead of you.  
Perhaps you remember asking someone to marry you  
and the steps that led you before a minister to make that covenant.

The steps we take are sometimes out of joy.  
And sometimes they are out of deep pain.  
Paul and MaryAnn Murray lost a lovely daughter two and a half years ago.  
Since then, their journey has taken them into public arenas  
as they searched for what caused Martha's death  
and try to make knowledge about prescription drugs coordinated  
among the health professionals who care for patients.  
It is a hard and often painful journey, I think,  
but they continue on this path because they want their daughter's death to have meaning.  
They want to make life safer for the rest of us.

Jesus could have chosen to walk another way.  
He could have chosen not to step into the city of Jerusalem,  
full of pilgrims and Roman soldiers and worried Jewish priests.  
But Jesus had made choices throughout his ministry  
and he knew that to be faithful to God  
and honest to himself,

he needed to step forward to Jerusalem.  
He did so, deciding to make his entrance a statement...  
a statement pointing to what he believed in the depths of his soul  
and what he hoped for from the bottom of his heart.

Every action, every word would count.  
There had to be integrity and unity in both thought and deed.  
There had to be sign and symbol.  
Everything must point to the love of God and the coming of God's rule here on earth.  
His words, his actions, his being had to personify God's way with each step.

Jesus entered Jerusalem knowing he was nearing his end.  
He needed what any of us need:  
time to reflect,  
clarity of thought,  
certainty of purpose,  
the cutting away of all that is not essential,  
a sense ...perhaps humorous sense ...of irony,  
and awareness that not all will see and understand: the point will be missed by many.

So what does he call for?  
A donkey.  
A lowly beast on which to ride.  
Why?

He has in mind the prophecy of Zechariah  
about the coming of a king who would be mounted on a donkey.  
The king in Zechariah is humble.  
The king in Zechariah will command peace to the nations.  
The king in Zechariah will have dominion from sea to sea ...to the ends of the earth.  
The king of love is a servant king who identifies with the poor.  
(Zechariah 9:9 – 10)

It was a rag tag band and a rag tag entry.  
The crowds were the usual pilgrims on their way.  
He made his statement in the midst of other statements,  
in the midst of cries of hosanna  
and praises for the Son of David, another king.  
He made his statement in such a way  
that it was tied to the yearning of the people  
for God to act in a decisive way once more.

His entry...continued with the cleansing of the temple and the healing of the blind and lame.  
(Matthew 21: 12 – 14)

All was symbolic.  
God's King is a king of peace,  
of prayer and communion with God,

of healing and compassion.  
All that he believed in was acted out.

Injustice, inequity, hard-heartedness...all the ways of evil...do not govern him.  
In him there is only allegiance to God and God's way.  
His steps are steps on that way ...no matter where it leads.

That way is that way of life...even though it is the way of the cross.  
It is the way of life in the face of death.  
It is the way of life that alone will conquer the power of death.

I ask you to notice how simple and straightforward and honest were his steps and his actions.  
There is nothing complicated here.  
Simplicity and straightforwardness come from his willingness to make his whole life  
a response to the call of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian.  
He was born in 1906 and was executed by the Nazis in 1945.  
He was outspoken in this criticism of the Third Reich, denouncing Hitler on the radio in 1933.  
He was forbidden teaching posts and banned from Berlin.  
When war broke out in 1939 he was on a lecture tour in the United States  
and could have remained there.  
But he felt the call of God... the call to responsible action.  
So he returned to Germany and took up work with the Confessing Church  
and the opposition to Hitler.

Like Jesus he took a step along a way fraught with danger.  
To him it was clear and it was simple.  
The Christian life demanded it of him.

“Who stands his ground? Only the man whose ultimate criterion is not in his reason,  
his principles, his conscience, his freedom or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice  
all these things when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and exclusive  
allegiance to God. The responsible (person) seeks to make his (or her) whole life a response  
to the question and call of God.” (Letters and Papers from Prison)

The beauty and the grace and the challenge of Palm Sunday are seen  
in the responsibility to God and God alone  
that Jesus lived out and that saints have lived out ever since in this world.  
It is always a matter of being true to who we are  
and, even more importantly, to what we discern of who God is.

I quote Bonhoeffer again:

“We have been the silent witnesses of evil deeds. Many storms have gone over our heads.  
We have learnt the art of deception and of equivocal speech. Experience has made us suspicious  
of others, and prevented us from being open and frank. Bitter conflicts have made us weary and  
even cynical. Are we still serviceable? ...Will our spiritual reserves prove adequate and our  
candour with ourselves remorseless enough to enable us to find our way back again to simplicity

and straightforwardness?" (Letters and Papers from Prison)

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in what it represents,  
in the direction it sets,  
in the destination it envisions,  
in the way it undertakes.

We may not know when the end is coming.  
It may not be clear to us at all.  
We do have each day, though,  
to make statements with our actions and our words.  
We do have each day to live responsibly out of our faith in God,  
God who is known to us in Jesus Christ:  
the king of peace,  
the king of compassion,  
the humble servant king who identifies with the poor.

Let us walk this Way in Holy Week  
and may our feet follow in the steps of Jesus.

Rev. Diane Blanchard  
Matthew 21: 1 – 11 (12 – 14)