



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Are we the better plan?

Clay Nelson © 10 April 2022

The Christian world is beginning Holy Week this week. I know that because it always begins the Sunday before Easter with Palm Sunday, the celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. I know today is that day because all this week I've been inexplicably humming a song I used to teach the children of my parish on Palm Sunday years ago when my theology was more uncritical. I can't remember all the verses, being old and all, but here are some snippets.

*Well, surprise, surprise,
God is a surprise, right before your eyes.
It's baffling to the wise.
Surprise, surprise, God is a surprise.
Open up your eyes and see.*

*Moses tended sheep upon a mountaintop.
He hardly noticed when a burning bush said: "Stop!
Set my people free and take them to my land.
"That couldn't be my God," he said, "He'd have a better plan."*

*Peter and the rest of that straggly little band,
they all ran away when darkness hit the land.
Whoever heard of a humble, fumbling boss?
"He couldn't be our God," they said. "He's hanging on a cross."*

Except for a stuttering, insecure Moses lamenting that God would have a better plan, I find the song annoying. Who needs a cheery little tune running through your head during the most sombre week of the church year?

Even more annoying is the song's suggestion that Jesus's cruel execution was God's idea of a plan. If I interpret it like the church has done, killing his son was the best plan God could come up with to save us from being who we are, flawed and imperfect.

Suppose you come to me for spiritual support about something that is making your life hell. There are so many examples to choose from. Suppose it is a no-win choice facing you at work or guilt over hurting someone unintentionally or your partner being diagnosed with Alzheimer's or your doctor telling you your cancer is no longer in remission and there is nothing more she can do. I have found the church's response that everything is going to be OK because God sent his only son to a cruel and bloody death for me, totally stuffed. It doesn't change anything. My spouse still has Alzheimer's and I'm dying of cancer. And if that is all I offered you at such a moment, you would be justified in telling me to sod off and the rest of you would be too politely kiwi to say it.

To find any comfort and insight I have to look beyond the events the church's interpretation. I need to look at the unvarnished truth. Remember that it took four hundred years for the church to reach the general consensus that Jesus was fully God as well as fully human. Then for the next 1600 years the church rarely mentioned the latter.

Let's reclaim the truth that Mary Magdalene sings about in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, "He's a man. He's just a man." There is no evidence that Jesus saw himself as anything more. He didn't know his "last name" would become Christ.

He's just a man who faced a difficult world, like the rest of us. Disease, poverty, injustice, death have always been part of the human condition and they still are and they always will be. Our sense of wonder before the face of nature, and our outrage at the exploitative indifference of human institutions are still facts of life, just as they were for Jesus and for everyone before him. Life has been a journey of twists and turns for humanity ever since we sacrificed our fins to crawl out of the primordial soup and evolved to a point where we could trade relying on our instincts for free will.

As an aside, I have to wonder if that "free will" thing was an intelligent design decision. It ranks right up there with why God would drive wedges into humanity such as making some of us attracted to the opposite sex and others attracted to the same sex or by painting our

skins so many different colours. What was the point of that? Isn't life tough enough without those hurdles?

But back to the point. Jesus was just a man. Yes, he was a man on a mission. The mission was to give us an "Aha!" moment. Yes, life is tough, but we are not its victims. We are more than our animal instincts or our totally unpredictable and barely consistent free will. We are something more because of our capacity to love. We are the plan for a better world every bit as much as he was.

I don't think scientists will ever find a gene that will explain our capacity to love. Its source is beyond our DNA. Being human we hate mystery, so we keep seeking its source. Failing that, we all try to name it. Robert Burns named it a "*red, red rose,*" Jesus called it *Abba*, Moses called it *Yahweh*.

What the Palm Sunday story (and yes, it is just a story, not history) reminds us is that it is the capacity to love, from wherever it comes, that frees us from being victims. From entering Jerusalem in an ironic mockery of a royal procession to suffer betrayal from those who should've known him best, to being unjustly charged, to being rejected and cruelly mocked by those he came to serve, and finally being enthroned on a cross with the satiric label "*King of the Jews*" above his head, his life and death became a metaphor. The story reminds us to wrap the mantle of the metaphor around us tightly that we never forget our capacity to love. Sadly, the church has confused Jesus' embodiment of love with being its ultimate source. Sad because it makes us forget he is a man, he is just a man. When we forget we lose touch with the fact that he is no different than we are. We are no less human than he is. It blinds us to our own capacity to embody such a love unknown. Whatever he could do, we can do.

The word mythology comes from the Greek *mythologia*, storytelling. Each of us has a story; we're in the midst of it! We gain self-understanding by listening to the stories of others. They are best told in metaphorical narratives, poetry, songs and being who they are. Our closing song makes the point best, [*May your life be as a song by Jim Scott.*](#)

[Harrell Beck](#), a Methodist minister once said, *“When you understand the concept of the messiah you’ll know that it’s the person next to you.”*

“The person next to you” is the one who shows up when you need them, even if you don’t realise it.

Today, Jesus’ story is still incomplete. Holy Week still awaits us. Easter is still only a promise.

I was once asked *“How do you Unitarians handle Easter?”*

“Very carefully,” I said, smiling, using the old saw about mating porcupines...

But today we cannot escape the truth that love preserves us from becoming victims of the powers and principalities that surround us. We now know that our capacity to love cannot be washed away in a Tsunami or killed in a pandemic.

It is what allows us to go on in the face of whatever comes our way and ultimately what unites us and makes it all somehow worthwhile.

For many of us we find that the surprise. We are the better plan. We only have *“to open up our eyes and see.”*

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

What surprises you about who you are?