

Jesus' final entrance into Jerusalem is greeted with cheers and actions that recognize him as a king. Crowds of people gather to see him ride through the gates of Jerusalem humbly on a donkey. Icons and other paintings show laughter, children playing and lots of merriment with his entrance.

Through the opposite gates of the city, the Romans have their own parade, a show of military power that is a warning to the tens of thousands of pilgrims preparing to celebrate the week-long festivities associated with Passover. The Roman message is "Don't get out of hand. Don't forget that we can crush you."

But beneath these shows – one of high expectations for a new king with a new way of life for Israel and the other of military might and viciousness – is God's action in the world. As is true, God's action and presence are sometimes hard to see.

Jesus is riding into town knowing that what he has started will end with his death. He has become too controversial, too vocal, too loving, to survive. He has been warned not to come into Jerusalem and the leadership has said that anyone who sees him should turn him in to them. Raising Lazarus from the dead was the last straw. Lazarus' life, too, is in danger and his life is being sought.

But Jesus is not alone. God does not abandon Jesus. God is active in his life and in the life of his world.

Before he goes to Jerusalem, Jesus visits his close friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus in their home in Bethany. They and the disciples share a meal together. During the meal, Mary anoints Jesus with a pound of pure nard. Nard, from spikenard, is a costly perfume from India, not indigenous to the Middle East. She used a Roman pound, about the amount you find in a Coke can and equal to a year's salary for a Roman worker. Extravagant and wasteful.

But, even if no one else around Jesus seems to understand what is really happening below the surface, Mary does. Some scholars believe that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene are the same woman, but we don't know and may never know. What we do know is that Mary of Bethany understands the road that Jesus is taking, and rather than try to talk him out of it, like his disciples, she shows him extravagant love and affection. Using the costly nard, she anoints him as for burial and wipes his feet with her hair. At once sacrificial and intimate.

This is the way that Jesus prepares to ride into Jerusalem, having been prepared for burial and knowing that at least one of his intimate friends understands what is happening to him. He is wrapped in love. This love helps him gird his loins for what is about to unfold.

What unfolds is well-known. He is tried and executed. The world simply can't

hold and be confronted by so much love in one person.

On Palm Sunday, churches around the world have a tradition of enacting the Passion Narrative, the trial of Jesus by Pilate. Unfortunately, the reading has been used to drum up hatred toward the Jewish people as the murderers of Jesus. Hitler commended it to all Christians so that we would know that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus.

The church has struggled with the enactment of the passion narrative. For example, passion plays were banned in the UK from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century until their resurgence in the 1950's.

This year we see violence in the Middle East once again. Israel was attacked and has retaliated. More than 32,000 people have died. About 1,400 people in Israel and more than 30,000 in Gaza. The death toll in Gaza includes more than 13,000 children. More than 90,000 people have been injured across the region, in Israel and in Gaza. We can advocate our conscience about the war with our political leaders, we may be able to send relief assistance through our charity of choice, we can pray. It's hard to do much else.

But what we can do as the church is to say that we have a role in the hatred in the world. Unwillingly and perhaps unknowingly, but the passion play has contributed to the hatred of the Jewish people, and hate can beget hate. We can lament, and even if it is just this year, we can reflect on the role that we have played in ignoring Jesus' call to love one another, to work for justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Once Jesus enters Jerusalem he will be surrounded most of the week by his disciples and others who really don't understand what is about to happen to him, and really don't want to. How lonely that must have been. But Love is the storyline of Holy Week. Jesus also enters Jerusalem with the scent of nard still on him, and Mary's gentle touch within him. I imagine it sustains him and reminds him of God's presence. The week is bookended by Love. God does not abandon him, but pulls him through death and into life again.

We celebrate that Jesus did not abandon a life of sacrificial love when it became dangerous to hold onto it. We lament that we have not, cannot, live up to that kind of love. It's the kind of love that the world does not know how to face. It's the kind of love that cost Jesus his life.

We begin Holy Week this year with lamentation. We express our grief and sorrow for the ways in which we participate daily in the injustices of the world. We use more than our share of the world's resources, for example. We also experience sorrow for the ways in which the Church has fallen short of the call to love as Jesus loves. Lament is a start to change. Lament can bring hope that something better is possible.

Amen.