



Church of St. John the Evangelist, Elora
March 24 2024 - Palm Sunday
Canon Paul Walker

Palm Sunday is marked by great buoyancy and joy. Shouts of

Hosanna are heard as Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem in great triumph. He is only steps away from the garden where he will pray to be delivered from the horrific events about to unfold. He is only steps away from where he will be betrayed by Judas and arrested by Roman soldiers. Steps away from where he will be put on trial, denied by Peter, sentenced by Pilate and condemned by the crowd. Geographically, all of these events are very close together in the old city of Jerusalem. People follow this way as the way of the Cross, and Holy Week is intended to recreate that experience for us.

The old walled city of Jerusalem is a small area, less than a square mile in total area and it housed the Temple on Mount Moriah - the Temple Mount - the site that Abraham offered his son, Isaac. For Jesus it was the second Temple, built by Herod the Great, and it was immense. It covered 144,000 meters - the size of 12 football fields - and was understood to be the place that was, as Jacob dreamed, the “house of God” and the “gate of heaven.”

Jerusalem has been raided, ransacked and rebuilt so many times over its history that the stones you walk on now are not the stones that Jesus walked on.

Those stones are 20-50 feet below where you now walk, and in places of excavation you can look down through a reinforced glass floor to see the stones of the streets that Jesus would have walked on.

Of the seven gates in the old city, the Golden Gate, or the Mercy Gate, on the east side of the city overlooking the Kidron Valley is thought to be the gate that Jesus used to enter the city for the last time. It was sealed shut by Suleiman the Magnificent in 1541 and it is understood that the gate will only be reopened when the Messiah comes for Jews or when the Messiah returns for Christians.

Beyond this gate is the Kidron Valley and you look east towards the Mount of Olives where the Garden of Gethsemane is situated. But the Kidron Valley became Jerusalem’s burial grounds. So there are endless numbers of tombs and graves stones - Jewish, Christian and Muslim. It is thought that the dead will be the first to see the Messiah.

With the Golden Gate sealed shut, presently the only gate you can enter the city on the east side is through is the Lions Gate. It is sometimes known as St. Stephen’s Gate, as Stephen was stoned just outside this gate, but locals call it the Jericho Gate, for that is the gate you exit the city to get on the road to Jericho, that dangerous road where the man was robed and left half dead in the ditch to die until the good Samaritan came along.

Just inside the Jericho Gate you encounter the depths of the Pool of Bethesda, that place where the paralytic sat for decades waiting for someone to lift him into the pool when the waters moved so he could be healed. Adjacent to that would be the site of the Temple.

The Temple is made of of several courts, but central to the massive structure would be the altar for sacrifice and beyond that the Holy of Holies, where, after the Hebrews finished wandering in the desert, they settled and housed the Ark of the Covenant - the tablets of the law. Only the priest could enter this space once a year on the Day of Atonement and would go through the massive curtain as thick as your hand. It is now the Dome of the Rock, the Al Aqsa Mosque, where it is understood that Muhammad ascended to heaven.

Walking through this area you have a profound awareness that this area is sacred, holy, and full of mystery. It is a place of sacrifice, death, healing, reconciliation, and powerful divine presence. It is the house of God and the gate of heaven.

Today this becomes the site where you begin the walk known as the way of the cross, or Stations of the Cross. Since the 4th century this is where pilgrims carrying a wooden cross would follow the way of sorrow. Walking past merchants and coffee shops you recall Jesus' trial and condemnation, the place where Jesus picks up his cross, where he falls, where Simon

of Cyrene picks up the cross for him, and and you end at Golgotha, the stone quarry for Jerusalem which was the place of crucifixion outside the city walls. It is now situated inside the city walls and is the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre built in the fourth century.

It is a moving experience to walk on this way of the cross, and as you do so you remember the text that if we don't cry, then even the stones will cry out about the events of this sacred story.

These stones, built, destroyed and rebuilt over the centuries are living stones, and they cry out with the stories that they hold. Arriving at the Church of Holy Sepulchre on the west side of the city you recall the text, "the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." And of course the people, the pilgrims, become the living stones, the framework on which this story is still proclaimed.

This week through all the various liturgies we are invited to walk the way of the cross. It is intended to be a bit of a training ground, to build up some spiritual memory, so that when we experience the way of sorrow, which we all will, we recognize the landscape, it becomes familiar and will we will not despair.

Travelling on this road you learn that Love becomes the target to absorb all that we inflict on one another.

Love becomes become the sin, the cursed one, the condemned one all in order to say that is not the last word. “I go before you to prepare a place for you.”
“Take up your cross and follow me.”