

## “Soft Power”

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UCC at The Villages, FL  
March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018 *Palm Sunday*  
Zechariah 9:9-12, Mark 11:1-26

*Everyone in Jerusalem, celebrate and shout!*

*Your king has won a victory, and he is coming to you.*

*He is humble and rides on a donkey; he comes on the colt of a donkey.*

Zechariah 9:9

Let us pray... O God,

Teach us how to be a community that lives by the ‘soft power’ of faith,  
that is not compromised by the ‘hard power’ of fear and doubt.

Amen

Religious writers Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg collaborated on a book entitled,  
The Last Week with this subtitle,

What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem

The book begins with an account of two parades.

One is the triumphal entry that we are all familiar with  
of Jesus entering the eastern gate of Jerusalem,  
the Golden Gate, also called the Gate of Mercy.

On the western side of the city – the Roman governor, Pilate,  
entered by the front gate which was probably where the Jaffa Gate is now,  
identifiable these days with the tower of David.

Pilate came from the coastal city of Caesarea with a troop of cavalry & foot soldiers;  
and they were there to reinforce the city garrison  
during the Jewish festival of Passover  
to keep the peace by a show of force.

This was not just a demonstration of the military power of Rome,  
but they also served as a reminder that Caesar Augustus –  
whom the Romans believed to be the son of the god Apollo  
and their divine lord & savior, was the one in charge.

<https://www.amazon.com/Last-Week-Gospels-Really-Jerusalem/dp/0060872608>

Military parades... I was in quite a few when I was at West Point as a cadet,  
and they were held regularly throughout the Fall and Spring seasons.

You would not believe all that goes on while those cadets are marching...

the language – terrible! the jokes – filthy!  
the harassment of plebes – dreadful!

Nevertheless, the plebes were expected to make rifle corrections  
on the person in front of them – though that was limited to:  
“Butt in, sir”, “Butt out, sir”, “Butt right, sir”, “Butt left, sir”  
referring to the butt of a rifle stock.

It was a great way to spend an afternoon – if you like that kind of thing,  
and actually, I did.

Willard, p.2

I was proud to do it and one year, I served as company guidon –  
where I would run ahead and stand on a designated spot  
for the rest of the unit to march in and line up in position;  
and our company frequently won these parade competitions.

So, I have some idea about marching in parade,  
but the Roman governor's military parade would have followed  
a 24 hour road march of about 70 miles –  
that is, if they walked it all at once – at about 3 miles an hour.

Bill Richter runs 26 mile marathons in about 5 hours –  
or about 5 miles an hour.

The longest road march I ever did was 12 miles in the summer heat  
and that was plenty for a single day.

Most people back in the First Century CE walked everywhere,  
so they all had to be in relatively good shape.

Jesus was certainly no slouch, nor were any of the multitude who came with him  
on their 18 mile walk from Jericho to Jerusalem.

So, we have these two events in contrast –  
one as a show of military force, and the other as a show of 'farce'  
with Jesus entering Jerusalem like a king, but riding on a donkey.

Even so, this was not some kind of last minute stunt.

The image of a king on a donkey would have been recognized  
by anyone familiar with the word of God spoken in Zechariah 9:9<sup>b</sup>...  
*Everyone in Jerusalem, celebrate and shout!*

*Your king has won a victory, and he is coming to you.  
He is humble and rides on a donkey; he comes on the colt of a donkey.*

These two parades were simultaneous examples of 'hard power' and 'soft power' –  
with Jesus making the point that he was turning things upside down  
to get them right-side up.

Jesus was presenting a vision of "inversion" – a topsy turvy society  
where the powerless become what is most important –  
kind of like what seems to be happening with our young people.

I came across the term 'soft power' in the context of changes  
to our diplomatic corps which is essentially being  
systematically limited if not dismantled.

For example, 44 countries are currently without a US ambassador.  
On the other hand, the military as 'hard power' is getting emphasis –  
and the funding, to sustain its missions;  
And the business of the military is to be prepared for war.

Willard, p.3

‘Hard power’ and ‘soft power’ can work together as a healthy alliance,  
even when they don’t share the same methods.

When ‘soft power’ – and specifically, the soft power of religion gets co-opted  
to serve the hard powers, we get crusades, inquisitions, and witch trials  
with a lot of innocent people getting caught up in the middle and killed.

Yet with each generation, Jesus’ topsy turvy vision of the Beloved Community  
is rediscovered and applied with varying degrees of success,  
depending on how well his followers understand the significance –  
and not just the symbolism, of his words and deeds.

Lately, we have heard of young people walking out of school to demonstrate  
for safer schools.

Just yesterday, that took the form of a March For Our Lives  
throughout our country.

This brings to mind a passage from Isaiah 11:6<sup>c</sup>  
*and a little child will lead them.*

There’s some theological contention that this doesn’t mean children leading adults,  
because the full quote is – with reference to the New International Version:

*The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;*

*and a little child will lead them.*

[Is. 11:6]

However, if we see the ‘wolf’ and ‘lamb’, ‘leopard’ and ‘goat’. ‘calf’ and ‘lion’  
as ways of talking about adult mindsets, then – Yes, children can lead adults,  
because they have not yet hardened in their assumptions.

This passage in Isaiah has other images that are consistent with  
Jesus’ topsy turvy Beloved Community of inversion.

Again from Isaiah 11:3<sup>a</sup>-4 [NIV]...

*He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,*

*or decide by what he hears with his ears;*

*but with righteousness he will judge the needy,*

*with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.*

*He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;*

*with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked...*

This last verse recalls the Book of Revelation’s image of Christ  
confronting the armies of the Antichrist and slaying them  
with the ‘sword of his mouth’ – which is to say,  
that it is by the ‘soft power’ of words that conflicts can be resolved  
and people be reconciled.

Willard, p.4

Isaiah 11:9 provides a bold and hopeful promise...

*They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,  
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.*

This is a vision of a society no longer plagued by violence,  
but whose people maintain an active peace, balancing passion with sanity...  
*'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD'.*

Again, God's Beloved Community is to be guided by the Law of Love  
written on human hearts – which equates to what Isaiah calls,  
the 'knowledge of the LORD'.

So, there is a consistent vision that originally emerged for us as Christians  
from the Hebrew scriptures of the Jewish experience,  
proclaimed by Jesus in the Gospels as the 'Kingdom of Heaven'  
and by the apostles as the 'Body of Christ';

This vision was validated by the acts of Christians who challenged and guided  
the institutional Church down through the centuries –  
and even by people of goodwill beyond Christian affiliation,  
so that this vision continues to be a viable goal  
as a 'Beloved Community' that is possible even for our present day.

The challenge is still before us, though. We could still mess this up,  
and the mission would pass on to the next generation to make a difference.

The whole incident of the fig tree is a symbol of a society's prosperity –  
to which Jesus emphasizes the importance of forgiveness  
and the 'soft power' of words... and prayer.

A community that freely forgives and accepts forgiveness,  
empowers all of its people to live authentic, creative lives now on earth,  
while storing up treasures of love in heaven.

This does not mean acquiescence to criminality or submission to tyranny,  
but for accurate discernment and appropriate corrective action –  
even to speak truth to power.

Like Jesus said,

"Those who live by the sword will die by the sword."

And like the way that Jesus and the early Church lived,

a community that lives by the 'soft power' of the word  
will not die submissively by the 'hard power' of the sword –  
or the cross.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Zechariah 9:9-12  
as it is found in the Common English Version,  
describes the opposite of what we generally expect  
about kings and a kingdoms...*

<sup>9</sup>Everyone in Jerusalem, celebrate and shout!

Your king has won a victory, and he is coming to you.

He is humble and rides on a donkey; he comes on the colt of a donkey.

<sup>10</sup> I, the LORD, will take away war chariots and horses from Israel and Jerusalem.

Bows that were made for battle will be broken.

I will bring peace to nations, and your king will rule from sea to sea.

His kingdom will reach from the Euphrates River across the earth.

<sup>11</sup> When I made a sacred agreement with you, my people, we sealed it with blood.

Now some of you are captives in waterless pits, but I will come to your rescue

<sup>12</sup>and offer you hope.

Return to your fortress, because today

I will reward you with twice what you had.

*Let us be challenged and guided by these words...*

Mark 11:1-26

- <sup>1</sup>And when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Beth'phage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, <sup>2</sup> and said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat; untie it and bring it.
- <sup>3</sup> If any one says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'"
- <sup>4</sup> And they went away, and found a colt tied at the door out in the open street; and they untied it. <sup>5</sup> And those who stood there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?"
- <sup>6</sup> And they told them what Jesus had said; and they let them go.
- <sup>7</sup> And they brought the colt to Jesus, and threw their garments on it; and he sat upon it.
- <sup>8</sup> And many spread their garments on the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields.
- <sup>9</sup> And those who went before and those who followed cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!  
<sup>10</sup> Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming!  
Hosanna in the highest!"
- <sup>11</sup> And he entered Jerusalem, and went into the temple; and when he had looked round at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.
- <sup>12</sup> On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.
- <sup>13</sup> And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. <sup>14</sup> And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."  
And his disciples heard it.
- <sup>15</sup> And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons;
- <sup>16</sup> and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple.
- <sup>17</sup> And he taught, and said to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?  
But you have made it a den of robbers."
- <sup>18</sup> And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching.

19 And when evening came they went out of the city.  
20 As they passed by in the morning,  
they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.  
21 And Peter remembered and said to him,  
“Master, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered.”  
22 And Jesus answered them,  
“Have faith in God.  
23 Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain,  
‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart,  
but believes that what he says will come to pass,  
it will be done for him.  
24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer,  
believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.  
25 And whenever you stand praying,  
forgive, if you have anything against any one;  
so that your Father also who is in heaven  
may forgive you your trespasses.  
But if you do not forgive,  
neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your trespasses”