

The following article is based on a sermon preached on Palm Sunday this year. The sermon text was Luke 19:28-44.

Sandra grew up in what many would call a model Christian home. As a child, her parents did their very best to love and care for her, and to share their faith with her. Every Sunday the family worshipped together, and Sandra went first to Sunday School, and then later to Confirmation lessons and youth group. Sandra seemed to be growing in her faith and was appreciated within her church community. But at the end of high school, Sandra left her hometown to attend university, and during the next few years her connection with the church and her faith commitment began to wane. At university, Sandra was exposed to a smorgasbord of world views which caused her to question her prior beliefs. Her new friends lived to the beat of a different drum, and Sandra was drawn into circles of behaviour contrary to her upbringing. Later Sandra moved in with her non-Christian boyfriend, and her attitude towards the church shifted from ambivalence to rejection. Sandra's parents felt this rejection personally, and grieved over the loss of faith they saw in their beloved daughter. They also felt a great sense of shame as parents, and at times were burdened by guilt. They wondered if this was somehow their fault? Is there something they should or could have done differently?

As I spend time with parents and grandparents in my own congregation and beyond, I am increasingly conscious of a deep well of confusion, hurt and pain that exists because of the drift of children and grandchildren away from Christ and the church. Sandra's story is not an isolated one. Stories such as this have been lived out, I suspect, in the families of every congregation in our church. They are stories that are sometimes hidden, because they are difficult to tell and to process. They are stories which pain our hearts.

A Mixed Reception

On Palm Sunday each year we as church recall Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. Because this story is heard every year you are probably familiar with its various elements: an enthusiastic and excited crowd, the waving of palm branches, and shouts of "Hosanna". But while those elements are present in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John, they are not present in this year's Palm Sunday Gospel reading from Luke. In Luke 19 there are no palm branches and no "Hosanna"s. Only Jesus' disciples praise God, and rejection of Jesus is as much part of the scene as praise and acceptance. In Luke's account there is mention of "peace in heaven", but peace on earth is absent. Jesus' entry into the Holy City creates division. There is more evidence of wringing of palms than the waving of palms.

Jesus' entry into our world as the divine-human Son of God is an entry to a mixed reception - both back then and now. There are those who hear and see - and those who, for whatever reason, do not. That is part of the hard reality of our lives as Christians, and for many of us that hard reality is very close to home. It is a source of great disappointment - if not great shame and guilt for many Christians.

When Loved Ones Reject Jesus:

While rejection of Christ is implicit in Luke 19:28-44, this text can also serve as a source of counsel, wisdom, encouragement for us in dealing with the rejection of Christ by our loved ones.

1. Others rejection of Jesus should not be taken to be a sign of failure on our part.

In coming to Jerusalem, Jesus, the very Son of God, was coming to heart of the nation of Israel. The people of Israel were God's chosen people. He had brought them into being, rescued them from Egypt, given them the Promised Land and cared for them there. To Israel, God had been the good and perfect parent - and yet he had been rejected. In Luke 13 we hear Jesus say: *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to*

you, how often I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” Luke 13:34

Faithful parenting and grandparenting doesn't guarantee faith in our loved ones - it only assures that they have the tremendous blessings of having a person of faith in their lives. At the end of the day, you and I are not called to save our children or grandchildren - only God can do that. Our calling is to be faithful in our vocations as parents and grandparents - and to leave the rest in God's hands. Farmers can do everything possible to pave the way for a good crop - tilling and fertilizing the soil, clearing the weeds, planting good seed - but they cannot account for every variable that may affect the crop. There may be too little or too much rain, insects or disease may affect the crop, and so on.

There is, I believe, something of an “X” factor in Christian nurture. It is a thing of the spirit (Spirit) - beyond our capacity to control or manipulate. In Luke 19:37 we see the disciples praising God for all the miracles they had seen Christ perform - and yet others were clearly unmoved and unaffected. We do best to focus upon our own callings and to find peace in the knowledge that we are doing the best we can.

2. God invites us to lay down our burdens again and again.

We are told that when Jesus entered Jerusalem people spread their cloaks on the road. The Greek word that Luke uses for “spread” or “cast” is not found in the other Gospel accounts. It's a rarely used word which has its background in Psalm 55:22 - “cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you.” We honour Jesus with our cloaks when we give over to him our cares and anxieties - particularly in situations where we have little control. And God, in turn, works through that attitude of dependence to help us better respond to what is taking place.

Many Christians do carry deep guilt and shame over the fact that loved ones have walked away from the faith. But the Gospel - the good news of God's grace in Christ - means that we can and should live free of guilt and shame. In fact, where guilt and shame holds us captive, we are unable to respond in healthy ways to what has taken place. Our witness to our loved ones of the love and joy and peace that the Gospel gives is stunted or restricted.

It is true that none of us has been a perfect witness to others in our lives. Each of us has many “could've”s or “should've”s in our personal stories of faith. But if we had done this or not done that, can we say with certainty that the outcome would have been different? For the most part, we can't be sure. In any case, how does dwelling on the past help us in the present? And if we blame ourselves for what is not finally our responsibility, it can influence how we act in the present - where we do have some responsibility. God has called and redeemed and sanctified us for life and witness in the now. He calls us to bask in his grace, so that his perfect love may shape our actions and responses to loved ones in the situation that is the present.

3. We are called to go and fetch the colt, to focus on our own paths of discipleship.

I have often wondered what the two disciples who were sent off to fetch the colt thought to themselves as they headed off. Perhaps something along these lines - “What is Jesus thinking? Just going and untying a colt and bringing it back? That's enough to get us arrested! And what does Jesus need a colt for anyway?” But despite what they may have thought they acted in obedience, and God's will was done. In responding to others' rejection of him, Jesus calls each of us to “go and fetch the colt” - to remain faithful in doing what he asks of us. It is through our faithfulness in worship, study of the Word, prayer, service and fellowship that God can work to speak into the lives of our loved ones. When our loved ones drift from faith, our own discipleship can come under attack. We must be wary of how Satan seeks to use such

situations to dim our own faith and in turn the effectiveness of our ministries as parents or grandparents.

Above all, we are called to faithfully battle in prayer for our loved ones. In facing the cross, Jesus prayed to his Father that the faith of his disciples would not fail (Luke 22:32). How much more then are we called into prayer for those whom we love.

4. When we weep, Jesus weeps beside us, and goes ahead of us into the midst of suffering.

When we weep because of others' rejection of Jesus, we do not weep alone. In coming to Jerusalem, where he would experience that rejection deeply and personally, Jesus wept (Luke 19:41) - not for himself but for those who turned him away. Jesus shares our sorrow, and is present with us in the midst of it. And when the choices of our loved ones cause suffering and anguish we must know that our God reveals himself most fully through suffering. God is no stranger to suffering and is willing to bear our pain and grief. The cross stands eternally as the perfect case in point.

5. God is faithful even when his people are not.

The events of the first Palm Sunday gave way to contrasting scenes just five days later. Disciples that gathered around Jesus on Sunday quickly dispersed on the Friday. Proclamations of Jesus as Lord were replaced by denials. Yet, even in the face of this Jesus did not resile from his mission of love on behalf of all people, even those who turned their backs on him.

When our loved ones turn away from Christ, Christ does not turn his face away from them. In the waters of baptism, Jesus promises to always forgive and restore those who repent, however long or far they may stray from him. And where faith lives in the hearts of those we love - even though it may be as small as a mustard seed - we can trust that God will not deny his grace. Our love for our children or grandchildren may be intense, but it is only a partial reflection of the passionate love God has for them. If we desire salvation for our children or grandchildren, how much more does God desire to have them and hold them as his own.

6. Whatever unfolds, the Christ the King comes to give peace.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, his disciples shouted "Peace in heaven and glory to the highest". Faith praises God in the midst of rejection - not because that rejection isn't real, but because nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Through Jesus, we have peace with God in heaven, and the sure hope of a piece of heaven. Nothing we experience, however painful it may be, can take that away from us. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord" (Luke 19:38). Amen.