

## Easter: A message of change

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**T**oday is Holy Thursday in the Christian Calendar. It is celebrated in remembrance of Jesus' agony in the garden, followed by the last supper with the twelve disciples, and as a symbol of service, that he washed their feet. But then the evening turned dramatic as Jesus was betrayed by one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, allowing the identification and arrest of him by the Romans, at a time when they occupied the Land of the Jews, some 2000 years ago.

The Roman soldiers had been searching for Jesus since he was by many seen as a risk to the existing foreign rule and oppression. By the Mosaic leaders, Jesus was also a threat to the existing religious order and he was accused of blasphemy. The latter was outside the interest of the Romans unless it might lead to unrest. Although Jesus, who belonged to Judaism and was a believer in the Bible's Old Testament, his message was also new; it was a message about change, rebirth and renewal. It was a message about 'turning around and follow Him'. In the New Testament, we find a milder God, a messenger of peace, and a messenger showing mercy and sympathy with those who suffer and those who have sinned and seek repentance and a new chance to do what is right – in our relationship with God and fellow human beings.

In his sermons, Jesus had on several occasions stressed that his kingdom was not of this world. In a frequently quoted verse, he says that people should give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and to God what belongs to God. Fomenting tax resistance would have been a capital offense. But Jesus' message was religious, spiritual and ethical, not secular, although the consequences of his message would auger profound change in the world, too.

On Palm Sunday, at the beginning of the Holy Week, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, symbolizing humility, not power and might. But the crowd received him as a king and a leader. They strew branches of palm trees on the road; they sang and cheered; they saw in Jesus and his disciples the men who could show them how to change and find a new road of reestablishing their relationship with God and fellow human beings – and some may in Jesus have seen a secular leader, too.

It was a powerful symbolic message that people saw and heard on Palm Sunday and the first half of the Holy Week, as it had also been for his growing number of followers earlier, over the three years of Jesus' ministry.

Often, the dramatic and mysterious events of Easter are told as if the people turned away from Jesus from the time of Palm Sunday towards the end of the week, with the death sentence handed down on Good Friday, and the execution in form of crucifixion in the evening the same day. In the Bible's New Testament it is said that from the large crowd singing 'hosanna' on Palm Sunday, they shouted 'crucifix' on Good Friday, but we do not know if the people were the same on both occasions, but it is likely they were not. It is more probable that many of those who came to welcome and celebrate with Jesus on Palm Sunday had become afraid during the prosecution, fearing for their own arrest, torture and harsh sentences.

It would be wrong to say that people abandoned their religious, spiritual and ethical leader. And it would be wrong to say that the opinions of the masses can be swayed over night, which has so often been said based on shallow analyses of the events of the Holy Week, indeed when the sentence was announced by Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect of Judea, who sentenced Jesus to die on the cross on the Hill of Golgotha in Jerusalem. Yet, Pilate

also offered the crowd in the courtyard to let him go free since he found him innocent, notably not conspiring against the Romans. Instead, he offered a common criminal, Barabbas, to be executed. But the crowd is said to have wanted Jesus to die. Symbolically (and cowardly), Pilate washed his hands in front of the crowd, through that indicating that he would not take responsibility for the sentence. And on the cross, Pilate had a post placed reading, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of Jews', to give public notice to the legal charges against him.

Through the centuries and millennia, this event has been used to justify autocratic rule. Democracy, people's rule, is not reliable, leaders have claimed. People's opinions can change fast. Hence, it has been used to support the rule of kings and emperors, administrators and bureaucrats, educated and wealthy leaders, and so on, rather than uneducated, poor and ordinary people.

However, the analysis and interpretation of the event was wrong; it was made to serve the feudal and other undemocratic leaders. Yes, it was used in contradiction to the real message of Easter, a message for change and rebirth of faith, spirituality and social responsibility.

When Jesus was crucified, Christians believe he died on Good Friday. Muslims don't believe he died, or that it was somebody else who was crucified in Jesus' place. Christians believe that Jesus was resurrected on Easter Sunday, three days after he died. It was women who first came to the grave to find it empty, with an angel telling them what had happened. The women were scared, confused and joyful, and they told the good news to everyone. Over the coming forty days, he appeared for other women men until he ascended to heaven. The ascension is part both of the Christian and Muslim traditions. In both religions, it is believed that Jesus will come back before the end of time.

Now, then, maybe I have in this article written about Easter too much like a theological historian or preacher? Perhaps I should rather have written about the mystery of Easter more as a philosopher with all the religious and spiritual questions we all have about the purpose and meaning of the event? Perhaps that would be the only way of discovering the real message of Easter, the message of change, rebirth and renewal. Wouldn't it?

The holy books tell us what happened. But history and theology are not enough. It is the seeker who will find, not those who righteously and dutifully try to believe literally each verse in the holy books. We must go beyond the events and ask what message they carry and what meaning the message has for people today. Again, it is a message of change, rebirth and renewal – a revolutionary message that we must make practical and real in our everyday life.

Jesus said: 'Turn around and follow me'. That message is not only for the Christians. It is for every seeker of truth and goodness. The message is for Christians, Muslims, Hindus and everyone else, within the religion each of us belongs to. The drama and mystery of Easter must be interpreted in theological and spiritual ways. But most important, it must be made practical and real for you and me. We must all seek to come closer to God and to fellow human beings.

We must do what we can to feed the hungry, give something to drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, cloth the naked, care for the sick, and visit the one who is in prison (Matthew 25:35-36). Because it is in giving, we receive. It is in pardoning, we are pardoned. It is in dying, that we are born to eternal life (St. Francis of Assisi).

Dear reader, may I wish you a Happy Easter.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.

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