

Sunday April 13th, 2025

Palm Sunday

Luke 19:28-40

“The Stones Do Not Lie”.

Let’s play a bit of a guessing game today and see if you can figure out what is the thing I am describing. The item I am thinking about is used about four hundred billion times a year worldwide and its use is still growing. In the United States alone it represents a nineteen-billion-dollar industry and only oil represents a larger import value than this item. It is something we consume by taking it into our bodies and health experts, through medical studies, and despite what my dear wife thinks, have proven its positive effects on the human body.

Currently, researchers tell us that this product delivers more antioxidants to our diet than fruit, vegetables, and nuts. There is medical evidence that it reduces your chances of getting Parkinson’s disease, liver and colon cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, Type 2 diabetes, and as a bonus it improves male fertility. Recently it was reported that in a freeze-dried state it is also an excellent source of fiber, and it tastes better than prunes. It can also, surprisingly, protect you from skin cancer, but you must spread it on your skin for it to work this way.

This product has an impressive chemical makeup of over four thousand distinct chemical components, and if you add water and cream and sugar the number jumps to over a thousand more. Do you know what I am describing? It is of course coffee, which many of you have already enjoyed today. Coffee, the wonderful nectar, served in a variety of ways. and in a myriad of places.

Double doubles, lattes, ice caps, and espresso, are all available at hundreds of locations in Norfolk alone. What is your favourite way to enjoy this wonder elixir? Where is the best place to buy it? Even right now some of you are thinking, getting a cup of Joe would go great right about now; maybe some espresso to fight off the grogginess.

But how many of you avid drinkers of bean nectar, have ever enjoyed a variety of coffee called Kopi Luwak? Surprisingly it is the special coffee that is mentioned in a scene of the movie “The Bucket List”. (See Leonard Sweet, Gospel according to Starbucks) Kopi Luwak is the most expensive coffee in the world as it costs about 300 American dollars a pound or \$740 a kilogram.

Often, in specialty shops, Kopi Luwak brew is sold not by the cup, but by the ounce. One brewed cup of this stuff can go for as high as \$50. That is because only about one thousand pounds of this coffee, make it to the world market every year. It is very rare. Kopi Luwak coffee comes from only one place on earth; the island of Sumatra, in Indonesia, in the region, appropriately enough, called Java.

I’ve been told, because I can’t afford to buy any of it, that it has a chocolate aroma, with a nutty bold taste. Intrigued? You might even love to try some of this exotic stuff, until I tell you a little more about its origins. The word *kopi* is the Indonesian word for coffee. *Luwak* is the Indonesian word for cat.

Luwak refers to a palm civet cat that is intimately involved in the process of harvesting this exotic bean.

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A Luwak is about the size of a fox, and is a nocturnal, fruit eating cousin of the mongoose. The Luwak, though, is the Juan Valdez of the animal world. Luwaks roam the island of Sumatra looking for the most perfect, ripe coffee cherries to eat. In fact, a Luwak would rather starve to death, than eat inferior coffee cherries. The Luwak eats the best coffee bean cherries and then nature takes its course.

The Luwak's stomach can digest the outer fruit covering called the coffee cherry, but it eliminates the undigested beans. Yes, you guessed it. Local harvesters then scour the rainforest floors looking for these undigested beans, which are then cleaned, and dried, and of course made into coffee. Kopi Luwak has another name, but I cannot use it in polite company. When I think about Kopi Luwak I am truly amazed at how God works?

What is garbage, or some kind of animal waste, is somehow turned into a very valuable commodity. You see similar things in nature all the time. What is honey, that delightful nectar of nature. Well, it is nothing else than bee spit. I really like mushrooms in all kinds of forms, and in all kinds of dishes. I still like and want them despite knowing what material some mushrooms grow in.

When grapes are pressed into juice for wine making, or barley fermented to make beer, the fermentation process is yeast eating the sugar and then giving off its waste. Then there is the dove, that beloved Christian image. A dove, however, is just a poetic name for that trash eating bird called a pigeon that causes no end of headaches to apartment dwellers in town and yet God used it as a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Then there is Jesus who grew up in a backwater place called Nazareth. Nathaniel said of Jesus, "Can anything good come from there." And let us not forget where Jesus was born; in a stable. Think about that for a moment. What goes on in a stable or a barn? I've worked in barns, and it can be an affront to the nose. Imagine what were Jesus' first smells when he entered life; animal waste.

Then there is Jesus' death. He was crucified at a place called Golgotha, which was the garbage dump for Jerusalem. Jesus died smelling garbage. Now I know you are perhaps uncomfortable with these images, and that is a good thing. Because the first thing we need to know about how God works, is that he takes life, and he turns it upside down. What we think is important or valuable, he rejects; and he takes what we reject and makes it invaluable.

Time and time again, the scriptures tell us that what the world thinks is weak, most despised, and most contemptible in your life and mine, can become, through the power of the Holy Spirit, what is most beautiful and most radiant, and what can produce the most blessing. God can turn trash into treasure just like a palm civets' waste can be turned into the world's most valuable coffee. God loves to take this world and turn it upside down.

If you don't believe me, turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and begin reading at verse 18. Here is some of what Paul writes. "I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. But we who are being saved recognize this message as the very power of God.

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As the scriptures say, 'I will destroy human wisdom and discard their most brilliant ideas.'

If you want to be first, you must be willing to be last. If you want to be strong, you must be willing to be weak. If you want to win, you must want to lose. That is what this whole Holy Week is all about. It is about Jesus demonstrating what God's values are, and quite often those values are clearly at odds with the world. And nowhere is this truth more powerfully demonstrated than when Jesus enters Jerusalem.

For approximately three years, Jesus had traveled the countryside teaching, meeting people and most impressively; performing many miracles. In many very overt ways, Jesus demonstrated that he was the Messiah. The miracles, the symbols, and the predictions: all pointed to the fact that he was the one Israel had been looking for.

Opinion though on Jesus was mixed, partly because of his background; he was frequently reminded that he was a Nazarene and the son of a carpenter, but a significant number of people began to believe he was the chosen one. The blind who regained their sight, the lame that walked again, the lepers who were cleansed and most recently Lazarus rising from the dead, all screamed that indeed Jesus was the Messiah.

As the Passover, one of the highest and most significant of all Jewish religious and national holidays drew closer, expectations hit a new high. Now would be the very best opportunity for Jesus the Messiah, to make his intentions known. But what exactly were those intentions? Common belief and expectation said that the Messiah would bless Israel by driving out their oppressors.

People in Jesus' day commonly held that the Messiah was a military leader. In fact, some of the disciples believed this to be true, as we see when Peter cut off the high priest's slave's ear in the garden. Many other ears were inclined to Jesus just waiting for him to announce to the people, "Take up your swords. Drive the awful Romans from the land." I should also tell you that many scholars believe that this desire to see a military move by Jesus, may have been the motivation behind Judas' betrayal.

Some have speculated that Judas betrayed Jesus to force his hand. "Surely", Judas may have thought, "when the soldiers come for him, he will call his people to arms". Yet, as I said, God's ways and our ways are always, it seems, at odds with each other. As the crowds longed for a military leader, Jesus chooses to enter the holy city riding on a what, a white charger like some conquering general? No, he rides in on a small donkey. Why?

Historically, when a king came to a neighbouring kingdom, or to one of his cities, if he wanted to demonstrate peace he came, riding not on a horse, but on a donkey. Donkeys are symbols of peace. Imagine what would have happened if Jesus had come in on a horse. How far do you think the Romans would have let him travel? Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, he is the King of kings, but he comes to bring peace, not war.

The Israelites believed their salvation and their hope would come from the point of a sword; would come from military strength.

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What Jesus demonstrated was so unexpected that when he is arrested, lashed and humiliated: the crowds that cheered his coming abandon him, and even called for his death. They see Jesus as so far from the mark, as to what they thought a Messiah should be, that they reject him.

Let us go back to the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians again, “God’s ways seem foolish to the Jews because they want a sign from heaven to prove it is true. And it is foolish to the Greeks because they believe only what agrees with their own wisdom. So, we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it is all nonsense.” (1:22-23)

Just look at how confused Pilate in John chapter 18 is, when he investigates Jesus. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus replied, “Is this your own question, or did others tell you about me? Am I a Jew?” Pilate asked. “Your own people and their leading priests brought you here. Why? What have you done?”

Jesus answered, “I am not an earthly king. If I were, my followers would have fought when I was arrested by the Jewish leaders. But my kingdom is not of this world.” Pilate replied, “You are a king then?” Jesus said, “You say that I am a king, and you are right. I was born for that purpose. And I came into the world to bring truth to the world. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true.” “What is truth?” Pilate asked.

We continue to echo Pilate’s question, two thousand years later. We see how the world works, with its hunger for power and influence, and we see how Jesus rides in on a donkey and we wonder just how sensible his approach is. Couldn’t God have just forced us all into believing in him?

Couldn’t he have used some sort of cosmic bullhorn to shout the truth into our hearts? Instead, we read of a procession on a donkey, and of a crucifixion, and we think, “How offensive and how nonsensical? It makes so little sense. It is not how the world works and certainly not what attracts the world to want to follow anyone. No wonder the Pharisees objected to the crowd’s praise of Jesus.”

“This isn’t what we want. This isn’t who we want. Stop shouting and stop praising him.” They even went so far as to ask Jesus himself to stop the celebration. It was as if they were saying to Jesus, “Even you must see how ridiculous this parade is. You must be aware you cannot be the Messiah because you are not what we want or expect.” But the Pharisees were not the arbiters of truth. Even if the disciples remained silent the very stones beneath their feet would cry out.

For the next seven days we will relive how God turned our world upside down. How God took what seemingly was a monumental failure, namely Jesus’ crucifixion, and turned it into the greatest victory of all. How God took the humiliation of Christ and turned it into a blessing. Most of all, we will see how God took the curse of hanging on a tree and transformed it into the miraculous act of forgiveness and salvation.

“Remember, dear brothers and sisters”, Paul writes, “that few of you are wise in the world’s eyes, or powerful, or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish to shame those who think they are wise.

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And he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world; things counted on as nothing at all and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important, so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

God has turned this world upside down. He has shaken everything we think we know, to redeem what we thought was lost, and to give value to what we may consider worthless, namely our very selves. Hopefully, this Palm Sunday has given you something to “percolate” on as you journey to God.