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Before Holy Week, a look at Zechariah's nonviolent king

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Holy Week offers a strange image -- the image of a nonviolent leader who comes to abolish war once and for all and proclaim peace to the whole world. Is this really the kind of messiah we want?

Everywhere I go, I hear how countless church leaders, politicians, and ordinary Catholics support our country, our military, and our wars. They apparently believe in a rich and powerful God who will save us to be rich and powerful, a God of war who will bless our weapons and our wars so that we can kill our enemies, steal their natural resources, and find true security in our weapons.

As our politicians approached a government shut down last week, and cut millions of dollars for social programs for the poor at home and abroad, it was stunning to hear not one mention from them, or the media, about cutting our military budget.

This year, we will spend over \$100 billion for the war in Afghanistan. The National Priorities project says that 27.4 percent of each citizen's taxes go to that war. We wage war in Iraq, Libya, and Pakistan and continue to spend billions to build and maintain our nuclear weapons. It seems we have unlimited money for mass murder.

The solution to the budget crisis is simple. Shut down our wars. Shut down the Pentagon. Shut down Los Alamos. Shut down the Trident submarine bases, the SAC base, death row, the School of the Americas, all our military bases, and all our weapons manufacturing plants. If we stopped these wars, brought our troops home, and cut our military budget, we would have plenty of money not only to balance the budget, but to improve our schools, fund new jobs, offer free healthcare, build homes, and feed the world's poor.

Here are five U.S. nuclear weapons related programs, which probably violate the U.S.-signed Nuclear

Nonproliferation Treaty and should be immediately cut:

1. The new CMRR (Plutonium bomb factory) in Los Alamos, N.M., estimated to cost \$5.86 billion in FY 2012;
2. The new Uranium Bomb factory in Oak Ridge, Tenn., estimated to cost \$6.5 billion in FY 2012;
3. The new nuclear weapons parts factory in Kansas City, estimated to cost between \$1.2 and \$3.6 billion;
4. The Nuclear Warhead Life Extension program which would modify the B61 nuclear bomb, estimated to cost \$4 billion;
5. The Nuclear Warhead Life Extension program which would design a new warhead for the refurbished W87 warhead, which was originally estimated to cost \$26 million.

Instead of cutting the budget for mass murder, we cut services to the poor. We must demand the reverse.

Meanwhile, instead of condemning our wars, church leaders condemn Fordham theologian Sr. Elizabeth Johnson and others for speaking of God and following Jesus.

Over these last few weeks as I have traveled the country, I met thousands of people, many actively grieving the direction of our church, our country and our world. Yet so many people support war, want to cut programs for the poor, and care little about the world's poor, that it makes me wonder what God we worship, what kind of messiah we follow.

In light of our predicament, the start of Holy Week is provocative, even shocking. It begins with a symbolic peace march. The nonviolent Jesus enters Jerusalem by riding in on a donkey!

Jesus knows what he is doing. He is not just tired of walking. He is fulfilling the ancient oracle about the coming of a new "king" of nonviolence, a gentle, humble, meek ruler who would work for the abolition of war and proclaim peace to the whole world.

Jesus' arrival coincides with the triumphal military entry of the Roman imperial representative, Pontius Pilate, on the other side of Jerusalem. Jesus is making a bold, political statement. We need to understand what he was doing, if we want to be his followers and live according to his wisdom.

The stunning image comes from Zechariah 9:9-10:

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Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion. Shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass. He shall banish the war chariot from Ephraim, and the warhorse from Jerusalem. The warrior's bow shall be banished, and he shall proclaim peace to the nations. His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

When Jesus first saw Jerusalem, he grieved over the world's violence and wept. Then he clearly decided to take two actions. His first symbolic action was to fulfill this oracle of Zechariah. (I'll look at the second action -- his civil disobedience in the Temple -- next week.)

Jesus ordered the disciples to borrow a friend's donkey, and then mounted the donkey and rode into Jerusalem. As he approached the city, the people hailed him with palm branches, and proclaimed him

?king.?

The Zechariah image is perfect. Jesus does not ride a war chariot or a war. He intends to banish the war chariot, the war horse, and the warrior's bow. He proclaims peace to everyone. He is indeed a ?king? of nonviolence -- a whole new kind of leader.

With this episode alone, Christians are given the image of a nonviolent messiah who renounces war and violence and espouses peace and nonviolence. Anyone who claims to be a Christian must likewise renounce today's equivalent of the war chariot, war horse and warrior's bow and accept Jesus' proclamation of peace.

If we truly hail this nonviolent messiah, we cannot support our nation's wars, weapons, or warriors. We too strive to be meek, gentle and nonviolent. We too proclaim peace to the nations.

Just because so many priests, ministers, bishops and countless lay Catholics support war and its deadly consequences does not mean that you and I have to. The nonviolent Jesus who rides into Jerusalem on a donkey has not given up hope. Indeed, he offers himself as a symbol of hope, an image of living nonviolence, a model for true leadership. He wants us to welcome him and do the same. He invites us to join the parade of peace, to follow him on the path of nonviolence.

As we begin these Holy Days of peace during this unholy time of war, I invite everyone to discuss the nonviolence of Jesus with those around them. Ask your relatives, friends, students, teachers, priests, co-workers and neighbors -- especially those who profess to be Christian -- about this messiah's scandalous nonviolence, his commands to love enemies and put down the sword, and the political implications for today.

I've been talking about the nonviolence of Jesus every day for the past thirty years. Whenever some Catholic or Christian challenges my anti-war stand, I always ask them about Jesus. What he would say? What they think about his peace teachings?

?Why do you bring him up?? they inevitably ask. ?What does he have to do with this??

?Everything,? I reply. ?You cannot claim to be his follower and support war.? Bringing Jesus into such conversations often sheds new light on our violence and opens the possibility of a new life of nonviolence.

As Holy Week begins this Palm Sunday, maybe we need to ask, like the bystanders in Jerusalem, ?Who is this? What is this guy doing on that donkey? What is his message??

Notice the question in Matthew's version:

The crowds preceding him and those following kept crying out and saying: ?Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!? And when he entered Jerusalem the whole city was shaken and asked, ?Who is this?? And the crowds replied, ?This is Jesus the prophet?? (Mt. 21:8-11)

During this Holy Week, let's listen anew to our just savior's message of peace, and take heart, because his nonviolence is indeed our salvation. Because of it, we can rejoice heartily.

On Thursday, John will speak at Reed College in Portland, Ore., and then on Saturday, lead a day-long retreat on ?the passion, death and resurrection of the nonviolent Jesus? in Houston, TX. He will lead a

retreat on the Sermon on the Mount (April 29-May 1) in Los Angeles, and a retreat "The School of Prophets," on the prophetic tradition from Isaiah to Jesus, May 20-22 at Kirkridge, near Bangor, Pa. (www.kirkridge.org). To hear a new podcast interview with John, go to www.jesusradicals.com. His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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