

A Tale of Two Processions!

Mark 11:1–11

¹When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” ¹¹Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

A young boy became ill one Palm Sunday. His mother remained home with him while his father attended church. When the father returned, he was carrying a palm branch. “What is that?” asked the boy. “Today is Palm Sunday,” responded the father. “When Jesus came into town, the people gathered and waved Palm branches, so we got Palm branches today.” “Awe shucks!” replied the boy. “The one Sunday I miss is the one Sunday that Jesus shows up!”

On Palm Sunday, Jesus showed up. Jesus has arrived. The drama of Holy Week, the confrontation of the kingdom of God with those who are threatened, is unfolding. The Jewish leadership and the Romans are waiting, as is the cross. This is our story. And this day just may be the most important day of the Christian year. It is complex and complicated. It teems with irony. Jesus rides into the city, welcomed by crowds of people waving branches (as did our children today) and laying their cloaks in his path, only to abandon him and call for his crucifixion only days later. His entrance feels for all the world like a royal procession, even if his donkey is anything but royal.

On Palm Sunday, the temptation has always been to focus on the positive and simply neglect the undercurrent of tragedy, of the impending crucifixion, and thus miss the meaning and the power altogether. We forget that this is also “Passion Sunday.” The reality is that the entire city was in turmoil. People were clamoring to know who was gathering all of this attention. Since most of Jesus’ ministry was in Galilee to the north, those in Jerusalem would only have heard of him, but have never seen him. The atmosphere was electric. The whole city was charged with political and religious tensions. Not only were people rushing to see Jesus, but there

were political radicals – the Iscarii – who were eager to set off a conflict between Jerusalem and Rome. Any spark could set it off.

New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan begin their book, *The Last Week*, with the striking observation that actually there were two processions entering Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered the city at the head of a column of Imperial Cavalry and soldiers. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion.

What we often miss is that the standard practice for the Roman governor was to move from his splendid palace in Caesarea-on-the-sea to Jerusalem for all major Jewish festivals, bringing with him a military contingent. Many of us visited Caesarea last summer on our Holy Land Pilgrimage. The Romans were the occupiers, and occupiers of unfriendly nations have their hands full. This was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. And Passover, after all, was a patriotic holiday when the Jews remembered and celebrated their liberation centuries earlier from Egyptian slavery and their journey toward nationhood, freedom, and a land of their own. That's potent – particularly in the capital city, under hated foreign occupation. So Pilate came with troops to reinforce the garrison at the Fortress Antonia in Jerusalem, where today tourists see the carvings in the stone floor of the Lythostrotos left by soldiers playing an ancient game, called the Game of the King. The Lythostrotos is the public area where those soldiers guarded Jesus during his trial just days in the future.

“Imagine that procession,” Borg and Crossan write. “A visual panoply of imperial power: Cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, harnesses, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums.” All of this was like a slap-in-the-face to the Jews.

And what was on display in that parade was not only Roman imperial power but Roman imperial theology. Ever since the great Augustus Caesar announced that he was the son of God, Roman emperors were considered to be divine, including the current emperor, Tiberius. Rome had no argument with other religions. However

there was one religion they couldn't tolerate: a monotheistic religion that insisted that there was only one God and that it certainly wasn't the Roman emperor; a religion, that is to say, like the religion of the Jews. This small, feisty people, with their peculiar insistence that there is one God, that Caesar is not God, were a threat to the whole Roman system. And here comes one of them, on the very day Pilate is parading the Golden Eagles of Rome, demonstrating who's really in charge, here comes one of them riding into the city in the very way the people's prophets had said the real king would come, their Messiah, their savior.

When Jesus selected a donkey, when he rode into the city in exactly the way the prophet Zechariah had predicted—

Lo, your king comes to you; humble and lowly,
riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey –

It was a direct challenge to Roman power and authority. It was, in fact, a counter-procession to Pilate's. It was, Borg and Crossan say, "a planned political demonstration."

And here it's important to note what does not happen on Palm Sunday. Mark's strange ending to the account of the day's activities is significant. Jesus went to the temple, looked around, and left. He would return the next day and drive out the money changers and in the process totally alienate the temple leaders, who would then turn against him. But today – at the climax, with the splendid chaos of the messianic procession behind him, with peasants full of patriotic fervor – what he did not do was organize and lead a revolt. That's what the people expected and wanted: a strong leader, in the mold of David the King, who would rally the people, recruit the active insurgency – the iscarrii – that was already striking at Rome and ready to do more, strike a blow against the hated Roman occupiers, driving Pilate and his legions and their horses and chariots into the sea. It did not happen.

Jesus was not an insurrectionist. He was not a revolutionary, at least not that kind. His revolution – and it truly was, and is, a revolution – was a revolution of love. His reign was, and is, not one of power and domination, but justice and kindness. His kingdom was, and is, not one of military might, but compassion.

But make no mistake about it – Jesus, on Palm Sunday, places himself, and therefore people who would follow him, squarely in the middle of life's conflicts. Palm Sunday forever destroys any notion that Christianity is an otherworldly religion, concerned mostly about life in the hereafter. On Palm Sunday, Jesus gives an example for us to go public and to live our lives in the midst of life's conflicts.

David H. C. Read, longtime pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, was a Scot, a chaplain in the British Army as World War II broke out. In 1940 he was captured and spent the next five years in POW camps. In the spring of 1945, as the Allied forces closed in and the end seemed near, treatment of

POWs significantly worsened. Prisoners were transferred away from the advancing armies, marched for days and crowded into filthy camps with little food or water and no sanitation.

Near the end, the British prisoners were moved again to a new camp and were joined by several thousand Americans. Read tells about his first Sunday in the new camp. There was no chapel, so the men gathered in an open space, lying on the ground, some standing, sitting, some wounded, some sick, some dying. It was Palm Sunday, and Read had no notes, no sermon manuscript, so he simply told the story, of the way Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem, ready to endure whatever might happen to him there. Read says “I spoke of his sharing everything that had happened, or could happen to us, and how God comes close to us in him. I spoke of the Easter that was a week away... All of us knew we’d either be free or dead by then. In a way, far from the conventional sense of the words, we knew we were ‘in the hands of God,’ in the presence of Christ and his cross.”

For those prisoners, caught between freedom and death, not knowing which was ahead, the story about God coming close in Jesus Christ, sharing everything that had happened or could happen to them, must have been profoundly comforting and encouraging – because what we see in Jesus is a God who is right here with us, smack in the middle of the worst life can do to us, a God who knows our lives and never abandons us – never abandons us – never leaves us.

Palm Sunday. It’s the day Jesus shows us that he comes to us, to our city, to our families, to our lives, to our hearts – comes to claim his kingdom and bids us to follow, to be its grateful and courageous citizens.

This is the first day of the week in which he will die for us, to show us in a way we will never forget that there is nowhere we can go that he does not go with us, that there is nothing that can happen to us – no triumph, no suffering, no hell, no dying – that he has not experienced with us, and for us.

This just may be the most important day of the year: a day of two processions, a day when love confronts power, a day when love loves enough to become vulnerable, the first day of the week in which love will die and then destroy death, a day on which he comes to you and me to invite us to follow, to cast our lot with him and his kingdom.

May we pray?

Gracious Lord, you turned your face to Jerusalem and you did not turn back. You put yourself in the middle of life’s conflicts – and we find you there yet today. This week we follow your life, from your last supper with your friends, to your violent scourging and death, to the empty tomb, with angels asking us why we seek the living among the dead. This is your day and your hour, O Lord. As we come to your Table today, remembering how you shared bread and wine in a final meal, once again meet us here, and speak to our hearts that you will never abandon us, never leave us, but will be with us until the end. Amen.