

**“Everyone Love a Parade”**

**Luke 19. 28–40**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, Palm Sunday 2010**

One of the funny things about Luke’s account of Palm Sunday is that there are no palm fronds or loud hosannas...we get those from the other gospel accounts. But, we do get good, strong foreshadowing of what was to come later in the week. We don’t get it from Jesus himself, and we don’t get it from the disciples (who seem to be as clueless as ever). No, we get it from the shouts of the mob. While Matthew and Mark (the other synoptic gospels) have the crowds shout, “Hosanna” or “Save us!” – which could be quite threatening to the political and religious establishment, Luke gives us something that bodes far worse for this peasant sage who is parading into Jerusalem on a donkey’s colt...something that turns the guts of Rome’s governor, Pilate, and Caiaphas, the high priest. This is what they say: “Blessed is the king who come in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

So what? Did you hear anything threatening in those words? I heard three things. The word “peace” rings out. Peace is meant to be the standard of the Roman Empire. John Dominic Crossan has a contrasting paradigm for this *pax romanorum* the Romans first bring military victory and then peace. That was their *modus operandi* in the expansion of the Empire, whether it was in Britain under Claudius or under Augustus at Actium. And Pilate is operating under this paradigm. He is determined to keep the peace on this Passover holiday when Jerusalem is packed with Jewish pilgrims not just from the homeland, but from the diaspora as well. And where there are crowds, there is always the potential for trouble.

So, imagine Jerusalem the week before the Passover with the imperial security preparations under way. Imagine a show of force that will “keep the peace” by threatening the crowd with the heel of the Empire’s boot. Imagine Pilate, the governor, surrounded by his cavalry officers riding through the dusty streets of Jerusalem, coming to Jerusalem from the imperial residence in the far north of the territory at Caesarea Philippi. It would have been quite a parade...kind of like one of the old May Day parades in Moscow when the USSR was at the height of its power. It was a spectacle meant to send a strong message: Don’t mess with Rome.

As Pilate and his troops were entering Jerusalem in imperial procession through a gate on the northwest, there was an alternative parade...the one we re-enact each year on Palm Sunday...coming through a city gate on the northeast side. It had nothing to do with unbridle military power, but was a peasant riding on a donkey. Imagine yourself as a spectator in each one of those parades...what would you be thinking as you watched Pilate and his troops, and what thoughts would you be entertaining as you watched Jesus and his disciples?

Going back to our paradigm, there was a corollary in the tradition of the Hebrew social prophets: the tradition from which Jesus emerged. It also results in peace, but it has a vastly different starting point. First, there must be justice (and they explicitly indicated **social** justice) and then there will be peace on earth. Do you hear the contrast with the Roman paradigm: first victory and then peace?

Now, do hear a something threatening in the words of the crowd when they speak of peace? No? The Roman worldview is that there is only way to peace: **theirs**. I love the way Dominic phrases it: “Caesar not only proclaims but incarnates peace through violent victory, just as Christ not only proclaims but incarnates peace through nonviolent justice.”

The second thing I heard that would have promoted fear in the hearts of Jesus' opponents was the phrase "glory in highest heaven." If you are part of the religious establishment (think of papal authority before the Reformation), you don't want some peasant interloper to come forward and have the people showering him with adulation and imagining that the hosts of highest heaven are thrilled to have him riding into Jerusalem...you want that reserved for you! It is a threat to religious order to have some lowlife from Nazareth upsetting the applecart with his alternative wisdom. Like any part of the religious establishment in any time, Caiaphas the high priest would have perceived this as a threat.

The third thing I heard the crowd surrounding Jesus say was enough to get him killed. They called him "king." If people acknowledge Jesus as their king, if they owe their allegiance to the kingdom of God, it means that they no longer need to pay homage to King Herod or to the Emperor Augustus. It dislodges the political status quo. Again, we see the kingdom of God standing in stark political contrast to empire: a contrast that is regrettably still easy to draw.

So, which parade do you want to be a part of? Are you in awe of the military power and the splendor of the Roman *imperium*? That's where the power lies. Or do you want to join the "nuisances and nobodies," the powerless throng who follow this fellow Jesus?



A few weeks back I heard an NPR story about the crossing of the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in 1965; it was the 45th anniversary of that civil rights march. In 1965, state troopers on the far side of the bridge were there to meet the parade and they beat several of the marchers senseless, leaving the day with the name, "Bloody Sunday." I wonder if that march was too very different than Jesus' march into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. There were songs like "We Shall Overcome," which threatened the political and social status quo with nonviolent resistance – a tradition rooted in the life and teachings of Jesus.

I heard Congressman John Lewis talking about his own memories of that day, as chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and I was surprised at the lack of bitterness in his voice. I was impressed by his wisdom.

A **week** after hearing the NPR story, Representative Lewis was in the news again, this time being called "nigger" by Tea Party protesters as he walked into the Congress. *This is 2010, not 1965!* And the same crowd called on openly gay member of the House, Barney Frank, the chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, "faggot" as he walked into the Congress. *This is 2010, not 1965!*

What a difference a week makes. John Lewis being lionized as a hero of the Civil Rights struggle and then being insulted in the most deeply racist language available to an ignorant crowd.

Barack Obama is certainly not Jesus, but I wonder if there are moments when he can relate to the fickle nature of the crowd. The wind blows and the mood of the mob changes. He is elected with the cheers heard round the world, and then he is derided and blocked trying to do what the people elected him to do. Are our memories so short?

This sermon is not just about John Lewis and Barack Obama; it's really about human nature and how easily we are swayed by our own self-interest...how fickle we really are.

What a difference a week makes. Imagine yourself cheering for Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem. We all know what's going to happen, but Jesus' followers don't. They are

caught up in the thrill of their boy entering in triumph. They probably feel like they finally backed the right horse in the race.

What happens next? If you don't come to our Maundy Thursday service, you miss the watershed event of the Holy Week story! How does something that seems to be going right turn so decisively sour as to result in the death of the one the crowds proclaimed as their king? Who is it that yells, "Crucify him!" How can the same personalities in the crowd...the same characters in the play...turn on Jesus so quickly? How would you have responded...how **do** you respond? Ask **yourself** those questions. I dare you to wrestle with them. I don't know how well I would do in that position. I don't know if I would still be quite so visible and loud when the smell of death began to permeate the air. Would you? Can we still shout, "hosanna" if we aren't willing to walk the road to Golgotha...to bear the cross?



"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." What a difference a week makes. Everyone loves a parade, don't we?

Amen.