

“Triumph – Tragedy – Triumph”

Mark 11.1–11

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 5 April 2009

Palm Sunday strikes me as a schizophrenic holiday. It starts a week in which Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph and the week winds up blood-filled. And the following week brings new life. It’s quite a roller coaster ride.

Look at the Palm Sunday event itself. It was Passover, and the holy city of Jerusalem was flooded with pilgrims. It was a dangerous time to be in the city, because the possibility of riot was simmering just below the surface of the crowd’s collective conscious. The boot of the Roman oppressor was keenly felt.

Earlier this week, I saw a television news report that showed London’s public statues being encased in protective plywood in anticipation of riots during the G20 conference, and that sort of expectation must have been seemed familiar in Jerusalem when throngs of people filled the city and religious extremists stirred up trouble.

Jesus and his followers had come from the north in Galilee before setting off for Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and then stayed east of the city near the Mount of Olives. The gospel writers tell us that he entered on a donkey’s colt, and the synoptic gospels tell us that people spread their cloaks on the ground before him. Mark and Matthew tell us that branches were spread, as well, but only John’s gospel identifies them as palm fronds.

This is not an accidental or an unplanned entry. Jesus is well aware of what his decision to parade into Jerusalem means. . . . But sometimes I wonder if the meaning is lost of us.

Jerusalem is not just any city. For Jews in Jesus’ day it was the center of the universe. For all intents and purposes, Jerusalem was seen as God’s hometown. The salvation history of the Jewish people rotated around the events of Jerusalem. Not only was the Temple in Jerusalem the center of Jewish ritual practice, it was thought to meditate God’s forgiveness of sins.

Two entry parades happened on that day. And only one was worthy of coverage by NBC. . . it would not have been exactly like watching the Tournament of Roses Parade on New Year’s Day or Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. Instead of lavish floral floats or oversized floating cartoon characters, the Roman parade was a military procession meant to impress and even to terrify the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Passover pilgrims. It was, perhaps, more like Leni Riefenstahl’s 1934 propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*, which captured the Nazi rally at Nuremberg. (If you’ve never seen that film, it’s on YouTube, and you should see it.) In fact, the Nazis took many of their symbols and icons from the Romans. That standard of the Roman legion with an eagle mounted on top was a symbol of the military power of empire. It was adopted directly by the Nazis. (The German word for empire is *Reich*, by the way, as in the Third Reich, and we would do well to remember that one of the factors that enabled the rise of Nazism was a desperate and misguided response to the Great Depression.)

Try to visualize well-disciplined Roman legions marching in through the gates of Jerusalem, perhaps like jack-booted SS troops. Imagine the imperial cavalry, mounted on war horses designed to intimidate any would-be protester. The message would have been lost on no one: keep in line or the power of Rome will come down on you. . . hard.

The irony – the insult – of the Roman imperial presence in Jerusalem during the Passover was that this holiday celebrates the freedom of the Jewish people from another empire: the Egyptian empire of Pharaoh. Make no mistake: Palm Sunday is politically charged.

According to Marcus Borg and Dom Crossan,¹ imperial troops would have come from Caesarea, about 70 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Their entry into Jerusalem would have been from the west. The gospel accounts tell us that Jesus was at Bethany or the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and so he would have entered from the east.

Two entries...two triumphs. One, a show of imperial force...the other a peasant procession. Which king would you rather follow: Caesar with the force of empire behind him or peasant Jesus with his ragtag band of followers?

Listen to the prophecy of Zechariah:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war-horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.”²

Does it sound familiar? Perhaps the writer of Mark’s gospel, the first in our canon, filled in a few details in his account of Palm Sunday from Zechariah. But, listen to the contrast with Caesar in the description of this anti-imperial king of peace: “He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.” Those are deeply countercultural words that have a clear meaning, and clear implications for Jesus and for the dominion of God that he came to proclaim.

It’s hard to imagine a more stark contrast. But, the irony too often is lost on us, especially if we turn toward theocracy or toward turning Christianity into the establishment, when clearly it functions best and truest as a movement.



On a more person level, the thought occurred to me the other day...only about a third of you will come to our Tenebrae service on Maundy Thursday, and for you the story of Jesus’ last week starts with the triumph of Palm Sunday and moves directly to the triumph of Easter Sunday. Intellectually, you all know what happens to Jesus. But, liturgically, the story makes absolutely no sense unless we walk through the desertion of Maundy Thursday and the crucifixion of Good Friday. Jumping from Palm Sunday to Easter means that there is no shadow, no death, no dark night of the soul...it’s all just happiness and cheer. And that is not reality.

It isn’t a real reflection of a life faith, because without dying there can be no glory of resurrection. Without suffering, there can be no relief. Without illness, there can be no healing. Without the deep darkness of night, there can be no moment of sunrise. Sometimes, I wonder if we’d like to just skip all of that and move right on the Easter...no muss, no fuss. Perhaps when we cry, “Hosanna!” which means, “save us,” we should be asking God to save us from ourselves and our avoidance of pain.

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

² Zechariah 9.9–10

What have been your dark nights of the soul? When have you walked through an experience that seems excruciating and found that you have the strength to come through on the other side? We all have them. . .no life is untouched by human tragedy. The key is that we walk through the moments of tragedy – and the moments of triumph – **together** as God's people. We don't do it alone. And we walk in communion with a God who knows and understands human suffering.

I asked a moment ago whether you'd rather be in the triumphal procession of Roman legions with all their military glory or with the peasant procession of Jesus. Let me put it a different way: When things are at their most dismal, whose compassion do you want rely upon – Caesar's or Christ's? When, like Jesus in that last week, you are facing your own mortality, do put your trust in the Empire or the Kingdom? When you shout, "Hosanna!" whom do you want to save you: Caesar or Christ?



Yes, we should wave the palm fronds. Yes, we should proclaim Christ the king of peace. Yes, we should shout "hosanna!" – save us.

But, I wonder if we ought to, for at least a moment, suspend our knowledge of the Easter resurrection in order to understand better what is going on during Palm Sunday. I wonder if we need to be more mindful of the forces of Caesar's empire and God's dominion that were at play for Jesus and his followers. I wonder if we need to be willing to walk through the shadows of death as part of our faith, rather than focusing only on the joyous moments. The joy will come, but the depth of jubilation can only be full if we experience the costs as well.

"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Amen.