

**Palm Sunday
March 25, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Those who are relatively new to St. Cyprian's may wonder why I only read a portion of the Passion Gospel instead of the whole XX pages. I feel that the Passion Gospel is most appropriately read on Good Friday. However, the number of people in almost all congregations who would attend a Good Friday service is relatively small compared to those that are present on Palm Sunday. So, if the people are going to hear the Good Friday story, then they might as well hear it on Palm Sunday.

In addition, the service this morning is really rather bi-polar ... we come into the church in a procession singing "All glory, laud, and honor," waving palms, and shouting "Hosanna!" and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Then the service takes this abrupt turn in the reading of the Passion Gospel. Finally, we celebrate the Resurrection in the Holy Eucharist. It is like a roller coaster ... up for the Triumphal Entry ... down for the Passion Gospel ... and then up again for the Holy Eucharist.

So this morning I have taken the liberty of focusing on Palm Sunday this morning. I encourage you to read the entire Passion Gospel when you feel it is fitting. And, on Good Friday ... here at St. Cyprian's ... we will have two services: At noon we will read the Passion Gospel and then meditate on the story as we worship with the Stations of the Cross. Then at 5:30 we will have a simple Taize' service with simple songs and chants as we focus on the last seven words of Jesus, and our worship will conclude with a labyrinth walk on the Commons.

So ... on to Palm Sunday.

Yesterday hundreds of thousands of students and others gathered in Washington, DC for the March for Our Lives, and there were over 800 other March for Our lives in cities around the world, including here in St. Augustine. There has been jubilation in the success of this rally, but it is muted by its cause ... the death of 17 students and staff from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School here in our state. So, was the March for Our Lives a parade or a protest? Was it a celebration or a demonstration?

Palm Sunday, the last Sunday of Lent, is our gateway into the trials and triumphs of Holy Week. If your religious history is anything like mine, you know the drill. Some of you know how to make little crosses out of your palm fronds. Others will struggle with the bending and the origami-like twists and turns that one has to make for a cross that will last more than just a few seconds. And, for almost fifty years I have led most of the able-bodied people participated in the procession, and shouted, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

However, I'm not so sure that the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem was actually a celebration ... rather it was more like a subversive act ... much more a protest than a parade. I have come to believe that what we have called a Triumphal Entry for millennia is really about a Jesus who calls for peaceful but risky engagement against real-world injustice.

According to New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, the Triumphal Entry was an act of intentional protest. They suggest that Jesus was not the passive recipient of impromptu adoration on Palm Sunday. Rather, Jesus' parade-by-donkey was a staged joke. It was satire. It was an act of political theater, an anti-imperial demonstration designed to mock the obscene pomp and circumstance of Rome.

In their compelling book, ***The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem***, Borg and Crossan argue that two processions entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday; Jesus' was not the only Triumphal Entry. Every year, the Roman governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence in the west, specifically to be present in the city for Passover ... the Jewish festival that swelled Jerusalem's population from its usual 50,000 to at least 200,000.

The governor ... in this case Pilate ... would come in all of his imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome was in charge. The Jews could commemorate an ancient victory against Egypt in their Passover celebration if they wanted to, but real, present-day resistance would be met with military might ... and Rome was watching.

Here is Borg and Crossan's description of Pontius Pilate's imperial procession: "A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, 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. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, many resentful."

Remember, according to Roman imperial belief, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome; he was the Son of God. So for the empire's Jewish subjects, Pilate's procession was both a potent military threat and the embodiment of a rival theology. Armed heresy on horseback.

This is the background, Borg and Crossan argue, against which we need to frame the Triumphal Entry of Jesus. That Jesus planned a counter-procession is clear from the account of the event in Mark's gospel. Jesus knew he was going to enter the city on the back of a donkey. He had already made arrangements to procure one. As Pilate clanged and crashed his imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east, looking ... by contrast ... ragtag and absurd. His was the procession of the ridiculous, the powerless, and the explicitly vulnerable. As Borg and Crossan remark, "What we often call the triumphal entry was actually an anti-imperial, anti-triumphal one, a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor entering a city on horseback through gates opened in abject submission."

It is hard not to draw parallels to events today. Hundreds of thousands of children and teenagers around the country are saying loudly ... and sometimes silently ... "Enough is Enough." They have "walked out" of their schools, they have articulately challenged their elected officials, and millions in Washington, DC ... and around the world ... gathered to plead for commonsense gun control in the wake of yet another mass shooting. At the same time officials at the Pentagon ... under orders from President Trump ... are planning a multimillion dollar military parade, a symbolic show of force from the world's most powerful nation. And ... as if that isn't a strong enough contrast ... critics of the student protestors are calling for more guns ... more conceal-and-carry options, fewer restrictions on gun ownership, and more armed adults in schools. What, I wonder, would Jesus-on-a-colt have to say about this obsession with military might? If ever there was a place and a time to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, this seems to me to be it. The March for Our Lives ... this protest by the radically-vulnerable ... is speaking truth to today's centers of power.

Borg and Crossan may have that first Palm Sunday all wrong ... and so may I. But just because it didn't happen doesn't mean that it isn't true. If it was a protest and not a parade, I have no idea ... and the Gospel writers don't tell us ... whether anyone in the crowd on that first Palm Sunday understood what Jesus was doing. Did they get the joke? Did they catch the subversive nature of their king's donkey ride?

I suspect they did not. After all, they were not interested in theater; they were ripe for revolution. They wanted ... and expected ... something world-altering. An ending-to-the-story worthy of their worship, their fervor, and their dusty cloaks-on-the-road. But what they got instead was a parade of misfits. A comic donkey-ride. As New Testament scholar N.T Wright puts it, what they got was a mismatch between their outsized expectations and God's small answer.

I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that Jesus' political joke hastened his crucifixion. He was no fool ... he knew exactly what it would cost him to spit in Rome's face. Like all good comedians, he understood that real humor is in fact a serious business ... at its best, it points unflinchingly to truths we'd rather not see.

For those of us who struggle to reconcile the role of God's will in the death of Jesus, I believe this story offers a helpful but troubling clue. From the moment of his baptism it was the will of God that Jesus declare the coming of God's kingdom. A kingdom of peace, a kingdom of justice, a kingdom of radical and universal freedom. A kingdom dramatically unlike the oppressive and violent empire Jesus challenged on Palm Sunday.

So why did Jesus die? He died because he unflinchingly fulfilled the will of God. He died because he exposed the sham at the heart of all human kingdoms ... he died because he held up a mirror to those in power. Even when he knew that his vocation would cost him his life, he set his face "like flint" towards Jerusalem. Even when he knew who'd get the last laugh at Calvary, he mounted a donkey and took Rome for a ride. He was there to speak truth to the power of Rome. And, he was there to speak to the counterfeit power in the Temple.

I will end this morning with a blessing that I found recently. It is a beautiful but challenging prayer that has invited me to move from this intensive liturgy that we do here on Sunday morning to the extensive liturgy that I do during the week. "May God bless us with discomfort ... discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts. May God bless us with anger ... anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace. May God bless us with tears ... tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy. And may God bless us with foolishness ... enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done."

Two processions. Two kingdoms. Two symbolic journeys into Jerusalem. Stallion or donkey? Parade or protest? Which will you choose? I'll be honest, sometimes I'd rather just wave a palm branch, sing a few rounds of "Hosanna," and go home. However, when I take seriously what Jesus took seriously I am invited into something far riskier ... his donkey ride cost him everything. Yesterday I was in a protest ... by the time we got to the middle of the Bridge of Lions you could already see other protesters approaching the Castillo. And, when we got the Castillo we turned around and could still see protesters just beginning to cross the Bridge of Lions. It was not a parade ... it was a protest. Sometimes, we just need to speak truth to power. Parade or protest. Your choice.

Amen.