

Lent 1 Palm Sunday

You already know about Jesus' request for the donkey, the cloaks strewn on the street before him, the waving palm branches, the loud hosannas. It was quite the parade. It was festive. It was exciting. It was in a way, his funeral procession! You have heard the story many times and you know it well!

What most of us do not know, is that on the same day that Jesus was entering into Jerusalem from the east on the back of a lowly donkey, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, was entering Jerusalem from the west. The procession which followed Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God. The procession which followed Pilate proclaimed the power of the Roman empire.

Palm Sunday is the first day of Holy Week. It leads to Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It is the most sacred week of the Christian year.

It was Passover – an annual festival in which the Jewish people celebrated their liberation from the oppressive, Babylonian empire.

Pilate's procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God. It began with Emperor Augustus and his father Apollo. Pilate's procession was a visual feast of power....cavalry on horses, soldiers, armor, weapons, metal, banners, gold. Power!!! Imagine the sounds of marching feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums, the swirling of dust.

And on the other side of town, palm branches waving, shouts of, "Hosanna, Glory to God in the highest", and a lowly servant, the pitter pat of a donkey's hooves. What a contrast!

Did you know that these two polar opposite parades were going on at the same time on opposite sides of town?

Jerusalem became the capital of ancient Israel and around 1000 BC., David was its King. It was the greatest period in Israel's history. The country was united – all 12 tribes living peacefully under one king.

Jerusalem was large, wealthy, powerful, and its people were safe from marauding neighbors. David was a just and righteous King. He became associated with goodness, power, protection and justice. He was a shepherd-king.

So revered was David that the hoped for future deliverer, the messiah, was expected to be a son of David, (recall how we sing at Christmas, “born of David’s line”?), someone would be coming from David’s genealogy who would be an even greater king than David.

But in 63 BC, Jerusalem fell under Roman rule and soon became a corrupt place, full of abuse, and greed and struggle. 70 years later there was a delicate balancing act. Wealthy, educated, religious Jews, but still paying homage to Roman authority and Roman theology. Through the use of at least suspect theology, the Temple held great power. It dominated the people. Jewish authorities had considerable power. It often became oppressive and abusive.

And into this arena comes John the Baptist.....John called the people to repent of their sins. And then he baptized them. Wait a minute, only the Jewish authorities, acting under the jurisdiction of the Temple had the authority to baptize. Certainly not this madman of the desert John! And as if that wasn't enough, next comes this rebel Jesus, from this insignificant village of Nazareth, and he has the audacity to suggest that He has the authority to offer forgiveness. No animal sacrifice required! No temple tax!! And what's more, he eats with low lifes like tax collectors and sinners! All of this flew in the face of Jewish tradition and what they had perceived as their authority!

Jesus begins to be understood by the religious and governmental authorities as anti-temple and contemptuous of the government – a criticizer, an enemy.

The synagogue and the temple- had once been a place he had loved, it is where he studied and learned the scriptures – it was where he felt

God's call upon his life. But seeing how corrupt and abusive Jerusalem and those who ran the temple had become, Jesus wept.

In Mark, Jerusalem becomes central. Jesus journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem. Peter affirms that Jesus is the Messiah. Eventually Jesus enters Jerusalem on what we now call, Palm Sunday. We continue to learn more about what it means to follow Jesus – the cost we might have to pay to be a disciple.

Following Jesus means following him on The Way. Sometime The Way leads to joy, peace, celebration, healing, gratitude. Sometimes The Way leads to struggle, pain and hardship. Sometimes it takes us into situations where we would rather not go. Sometimes it leads us into Jerusalem. Jerusalem was known as the Holy City. But Jerusalem becomes the place of confrontation with the authorities. Jerusalem becomes the place of death and resurrection.

The Prediction of the Passion is a polite way of saying that Jesus is telling his disciples that when they arrive into the heart of Jerusalem,

he will be betrayed into human hands. They will kill him. He will rise again.

“We are going to Jerusalem, and the son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death....they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him. And after 3 days he will rise again.”

Jesus predicts his death on three occasions and after each one he does some teaching about what it means to follow Him. The cross is becoming a symbol for The Way, the path of death and resurrection.

As Jesus again and again tries to teach his followers what it really means to follow him. He tries to paint a picture. He tries to clarify things for his disciples. It is no accident that just before Jesus enters into Jerusalem there are two stories of blindness and sight. Jesus first heals a blind man in Bethsaida, and then he restores the sight to a blind beggar on the street as the Palm Sunday Parade moves through town. Two men had their sight restored. They could see everything

clearly. What does it mean to be a disciple...to follow Jesus? Can we gain some clarity on that?

I want you to grow in your understanding and appreciation of Palm Sunday. What are the implications for you and for me?

Genuine discipleship, doing our best to follow Jesus, means following him, even to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a dominating system....authority, often harsh and unforgiving, powerful, often oppressive.

Following him comes at a price, but it also offers great reward and unimaginable blessing. It means death, but also resurrection. Pain, agony, tough times, torturous times, death.....and then the wonderful sublime mystery of the resurrection, and life ever-lasting.

When you think about your life....who or what are the powerful, oppressors? What is the torture, the tough times? What or who do you fear? What is keeping you back, holding you down? What is your Jerusalem? Your Holy Place. Your Place of Peace. Are you, as a

disciple, like Christ willing to enter in? Enter into that debate, that confrontation, that threatening presence.....the struggle for good, and to do what is good and right.

When you think of death and resurrection.....are you willing to go down that path....the path of the cross? What might that mean for you....the death of an addiction, the healing of a relationship, the giving up, the taking back, a way of being.....and what might new life look and feel like? What needs to die so that something beyond your imagining might be born?

Palm Sunday....here we are talking about it the first Sunday of Lent. Throughout this Lent I am going to continue to talk about Palm Sunday so that when we do get there this year, you will arrive at that parade even more aware than you already are. You will have a better understanding of the history, the geography, the social and cultural climate. The familiar words around this Palm waving event will have greater meaning for you. My hope is that as you grow in awareness of

the truth behind Palm Sunday, that you might also grow in your awareness and understanding of your own truth....your real truth. That what needs to be confronted will be. That what needs to be set free will be. That what is longing to be reborn will be.

Mark writes, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David. Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Blessed are you! Blessed are we!

Amen