

## PALM SUNDAY

### Luke 19:28-44 - What Kind of King?

As Jesus rode along, people spread their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen . . . And then Jesus entered Jerusalem, the City of David.

Soon, the swirling dust on the winding, sun-scorched path settled down. As the colt carrying Jesus passed by, on the road, encircled by the ancient hills, the shouts faded. In the distance, people inside Jerusalem's walls could be heard cheering – or jeering the man from Nazareth – the echo of their voices ebbing and flowing.

Jerusalem, the city of prophets and dreamers – the city of profits and losses, where a few hoarded Caesar's silver while the majority of residents begged for even a single copper coin – the city where thieves and princes, whores and virgins, priests and pretenders all scrambled to attain their dreams and schemes.

Palm Sunday triggered the beginning of the end for Jesus. Jesus' reputation had spread throughout the region. The day before Jesus had produced his greatest miracle. He raised Lazarus from the dead. The masses heard about his miracles and everyone wanted to see if he could pull off another trick. The crowd was looking for one more miracle – another deaf person who could hear, a blind man who could finally see, the skin of a leper made pure. They wanted to see the healer – this mighty miracle worker in action. And if they could just see one miracle for themselves, if the Houdini of the Holy Land could pull just one more trick out of his bag, well – they might believe.

That was the first Palm Sunday parade. A large noisy crowd waiting to see the popular man from Nazareth in action. It was like a carnival. The excited crowd was saying, "Lord, if you give me a miracle, then I will believe." But, there was a second group there that day. They weren't looking to be part of the crazy carnival; they weren't looking for the miracle worker; they weren't looking for one more magic trick. This was a desperate group – looking for a political revolution – very much like a mass political rally, with all its intense fanaticism and rising nationalistic fervour.

The revolution had actually started years earlier. In 63 BC, Pompeii, the Roman general, conquered Israel, and now the Israelites found themselves in slavery after three hundred years of freedom. They wanted to rid themselves of the Romans. They hated the Romans for many reasons. The Romans made them eat pork, forced them to worship Caesar, forbade circumcising and were seducing them out of their Judaism.

Between 6 and 4 BC, the great builder, King Herod, who had rebuilt their Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, turned from being Herod the Builder to Herod the Killer as he ordered all baby boys two and under to be killed. He didn't want any baby messiah who would grow up to be a political king.

Twelve years later, Zaduk the Pharisee led a revolution in and around Jerusalem and two thousand of his followers were killed. The Romans strung them up; they hung them on crosses – two thousand dead men hanging on crosses for the entire world to see and to send a message to the Jewish population – This is what the Romans do with political revolutionaries.

So, on this Passover day, this first Palm Sunday – when Jesus came riding into town, they had

already experienced thirty-two political riots during the past five years. As a young man, Jesus with his fellow countrymen had witnessed thirty-two riots - six major riots per year for five years. And according to today's gospel, another riot seemed ready to erupt. It was political pandemonium. It was chaos. Hundreds of thousands of people were jammed into Jerusalem, and it was ready to ignite. Both the religious fanatics looking for a miracle and the political fanatics looking for freedom, chanted, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Hosanna to the Son of David. The king of Israel has come." It was a carnival, a circus, a revolution on the move.

What was Jesus doing in the midst of this madness? Here in this cacophony of craziness, Jesus didn't say a word. He rode in silence. It was hard to recognize this king – he didn't act like a king, he didn't look like a king, he didn't behave like a king.

What kind of king goes out and tries to get his subjects to love him? Or searches for his lost citizens like a shepherd searches for his lost sheep? What kind of king comes forward and volunteers to be executed on behalf of his followers? It's absurd. It's ridiculous. It's absolutely crazy. It does not make sense.

Crowds of pilgrims celebrating the Passover – the feast of God's liberating God's people from foreign masters – are convinced that God is supposed to liberate Israel from the oppressive rule of Rome. By conventional calculations, Rome would be difficult to overthrow. But God's people have always found their victory in their God's might, not in the might of armies.

The Roman rulers had their own ideas of how things were supposed to be. If they ruled, then their gods had to be mightier than the gods of the conquered – or perhaps the gods of the conquered, including the God of the Jews, had actually switched their allegiance to Rome. So, just in case the Jewish God had switched his allegiance, the emperor had a bull sacrificed to the Jewish God on his behalf daily at the Temple in Jerusalem. And once 'who's in charge' was established, the conquered were to render taxes and tribute, and were expected to support the social order as it was – the peace of Rome made sure by the rule of Rome.

Some of Jesus' disciples were trying to figure out how things were supposed to be. Jesus often spoke of God bringing a decisive change, of God's kingdom breaking through the way things are. Jesus' words and behaviour must have suggested to his followers that he anticipated a decisive moment in Jerusalem. Would this be when Jesus would finally stop the ambiguous parables, the invitations to dinner, and the talk about cheek-turning and praying for persecutors, and would he finally take charge in the way some expected from a person as powerful as he? Would this be when Jesus stepped up to lead Israel so that the nation would no longer be the suffering servant described in Isaiah, hoping for vindication but subjected to humiliation, and would instead confront and humiliate Israel's adversaries – the Romans?

Jesus does act decisively on Palm Sunday, but not in the way expected. Jesus' behaviour satirizes expectations for a conquering general or lord. He rides into Jerusalem not on an impressively outfitted white charger, but on a hastily borrowed colt. He wears no gleaming armor -- just traveling robes. He leads no great army, no defeated captives, no chests with spoils of war; he leads only his motley assortment of followers – women and beggars and slaves as well as Pharisees and respected citizens. It's a grand send-up of an imperial parade which the crowd joins.

Luke has Jesus' send-up of a Roman triumphal procession go directly to the Temple, where he engages in an all-too-serious demonstration against the elite Temple hierarchy, overturning the tables, driving the money-changers and dove-sellers and calling them "robbers." No wonder that

Jesus loses a lot of supporters after that; most have come to Jerusalem to participate in the very sacrifices that Jesus has prevented.

Jesus' way asks hard things of those in power – not just to be willing to laugh at our society's ways of displaying wealth, status, and power, as Jesus did in his spoof of a triumphal parade; His way asks them – it asks us who are among the privileged – to emulate his example. We're exhorted to use power not just to our own advantage – but to empower others. Jesus' overturning expectations as he entered Jerusalem and turning the tables on the Temple elites was a foretaste of an even more decisive display of God's power later in the week, a power that will change the world, with the most surprising reversal.

Although all the Gospels describe Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, **only John's Gospel mentions palms in connection with Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem.** Matthew, simply says that people "spread cloaks and cut branches from the trees." Mark says they spread their cloaks and leafy branches cut in fields. In Luke they spread their cloaks. So, what do the palms say? Why palms and not other branches cut from trees or bushes or cedars?

When reading John's Gospel, we need to carefully look behind the story for a symbolic message. Seemingly incidental details often point to deeper truths in John. **So, what was the symbolic message found in the palms?**

What we don't read but may assume is that the frond flappers in John who go out to meet Jesus move toward the city gate with the 200-year-old story of Simon Maccabeus vividly in mind. Maccabeus emerged at a time when the brutal and genocidal Antiochus Epiphanes ruled Palestine. In 167 B.C. Antiochus precipitated a full-scale revolt when, having already forbidden the practice of Judaism on pain of death, he set up in the Jewish temple an altar to Zeus and offered swine's flesh upon it. Antiochus was a follower of Hellenism and meant to bring his entire realm under the influence of Greek ways.

The Book of First Maccabees in the Old Testament Apocrypha witnesses to his resolve: "They put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families, and those who circumcised them; and they hung the infants from their mothers' necks." Stinging from this outrage, Mattathias, an old man of priestly stock, rounded up his five sons and all the weapons he could find. A guerrilla campaign was launched against Antiochus' soldiers. Though Mattathias died early on, his son Judas, called Maccabeus (hammer), was able, within three years, to cleanse and to rededicate the besmirched temple with no small thanks to a turn of events that drained the occupier's army.

But the fighting wasn't over. A full 20 years later, after Judas and a successor brother, Jonathan, had died in battle, a third brother, Simon, took over, and through his diplomacy achieved Judean independence – establishing what would become a full century of Jewish sovereignty. Of course there was great celebration. "On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred and seventy-first year, the Jews entered Jerusalem with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel."

Knowing First Maccabees allows us to read the minds of those who are waving their own palm branches. They are going out to meet Jesus in hopes that he is coming to crush and remove from Israel another great enemy, this time Rome. So, what do the palms say? They say: We are tired of being kicked around, hungry to be Number One again, ready to strut our stuff once more. Here's

our agenda, and you look like just the man we need. Welcome, warrior king! Hail, conquering hero!

The "great crowd" of Palm Sunday is reminiscent of another multitude, the mob, 5,000 strong, that was miraculously fed by Jesus. Because they had gotten their bellies filled, their expectations were high, like those of the Jerusalem crowd, whether expecting miracles or an uprising. But "perceiving that they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, Jesus withdrew . . . In the same way, on Palm Sunday, amid the clamour of the crowds, "Jesus found a young ass and sat upon it."

Like that of the prophets of old, this was an overt act designed to drive home the truth of the whole matter: a king bent on war rode a horse, but one seeking peace rode an ass. John's crowd was remembering another triumphal entry, with palm wavers, one that Simon had decreed – would be marked annually as a Jewish independence day. Jesus' mind, however, was on something else, perhaps recalling the words of the prophet Zechariah: *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass.*

The palm wavers justifiably see triumph in Jesus, but they don't understand it. Jesus has come to conquer not Rome but the world. He comes to the holy city not to deal death or to sidestep death, but to meet death head-on. He will conquer the world and death itself by dying. Just after his triumphal entry, according to John, Jesus makes it clear how he will win: "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all humanity to myself." His being lifted up to glory is his being lifted up on the cross.

We confess our misunderstanding. We, too, come to the city gate, agendas in hand, amid crowds lined up as though Santa Claus were coming to town. In a world that routinely places ultimate value on less than ultimate things, even the faithful are tempted to come with their wish lists. The palms say that such an approach has been taken before, but has been found wanting. Glory worthy of the name, the glory that is promised, will not be found in a miracle worker, new hero, system or political movement. "My kingship is not of this world," says Jesus – who also says of his followers, "they are not of the world."

Jesus' glorification comes through an act of self-sacrificing love. Life of eternal dimensions is the here-and-now gift to those who believe that this self-sacrificial One is the Son of God. The waving branches say that we misunderstand as did his disciples, the miracle seekers, the revolutionaries. Our hopes and dreams are too much occupied by the ultimately doomed and dead. And as in the case of the disciples, only Jesus' death and resurrection will clear up our misunderstanding.

The crowds cheer crying out "Blessed is the king." Nothing can suppress them. They feel liberated casting on the road their cloaks, their version of a ticker tape parade. Then silence....There is silence till the crowds shout to Pilate "Crucify him."

Although historically there may have been two different groups of people. Luke is connecting these two shouting mobs. What happened? What dreams were crushed? What vain fantasy did they have during the parade that vanished and caused them to be changed? Yet, Jesus remains unchanging. Even by riding on a donkey he mocks the victor's war horse thereby consistently proclaiming peace even as he rides to have violence done to him. But the crowds have no substance.

We may sit in church and hear this story read to us and feel sorry for those people who did not

understand. But, do we understand? We can process around the church waving our palm branches. But if we do not process into the world to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty and visit the sick and prisoners, we are fickle people who the next day are crying out "Crucify him." So, let us go into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. Amen.