

PALM SUNDAY (MATTHEW 21:1-17)

In an echo of the magi's long-ago visit, seeking the child born king of the Jews, Jerusalem is again in turmoil. Some ask who Jesus is, and others answer, "the prophet from Nazareth." Jesus adds to the city's turmoil for a second day, upending commerce in the temple courts. Jesus' entrance into the city is the first theatrical event, and once inside Jerusalem, Jesus engages in a second spectacle, a so-called "prophetic sign-act" in which he sweeps the temple mount clean of those whose financial interests impeded access for all to the temple. The "cleansing" rivets attention on his words, which signal both judgment and hope for deliverance.

While at the temple, Jesus takes time to heal sick people who are brought to him, and hears both the praise of children and the condemnation of temple authorities. That one day is actually a micro-view, a synopsis of his whole ministry - healing, praise, and upset, all packed into a day. At the end of the second day, he leaves to spend the night in Bethany, from where he arrived.

We all know the story well. It takes place on the Sunday before Easter. Jesus borrows a donkey, rides into the city of Jerusalem which is packed with Passover crowds. They greet him with wild enthusiasm, throwing their clothes on the street for him to ride over. They cut down leafy branches to wave, like flags. Of the four gospels, John is the only one who specifically mentions *palm* branches.

In the first century context, it was quite common and even expected that when a conquering general or emperor or some other dignitary approached, the city gates would be swung open and large crowds would come out to meet and welcome this person and escort him into town. The dropping of cloaks or blankets on the ground was a sign of

respect, a way to elevate the status of the guest.

Humble may not be the best translation or lens through which to read this passage. During Old Testament times and even in the times of Jesus, horses were not used for individual transport or even for farming. They were reserved for army generals and chariots. Donkeys were used for everyday tasks by the common people. Mary and Joseph used a donkey to travel to Bethlehem, not to demonstrate that they were humble or poor, but because donkeys were the mode of everyday travel. Most people would use a donkey to carry their baggage as they walked alongside their beast of burden.

Here again, as throughout all of Matthew's gospel, which we have been following since Advent, much of the Old Testament is brought into the story. Most of what has been written in the New Testament has its roots in the Hebrew Bible. Today's episode begins on the Mount of Olives, where, according to Zechariah, God was to begin the final battle against the nations and inaugurate a new creation. Zechariah wrote: "Rejoice greatly, O People of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey – even on a donkey's colt."

Jesus *was* humble, not because he rode on a donkey's colt, but because *he came to serve and not to be served*. He did not come on a horse because horses were only used in battle - to destroy, to oppress and subjugate people. Jesus came to bring peace to the nations, so a warhorse was of no use in his mission.

Jesus is greeted with shouts of 'Hosanna' which is part of a psalm of praise. The Hebrew word is "Hoshiyana" which translates to "save us." And again Matthew is quoting from an Old Testament psalm: "Please Lord, please save us! Bless the one who comes in the name of the

Lord.” This is part of the Passover Psalm chanted *as pilgrims approached the temple*. Matthew is developing a theme here - not one of humility - but one of pageantry - that is, an affirmation of Jesus’ kingship and identity as prophet.

The focus is on the temple where tension and paradox run continuously throughout the story. Jesus is at once both a commanding figure, a king on his way to the coronation, and a jester, mocking the conventions of power. Matthew’s Jesus both cleanses the temple, readying to fulfill its promise, and warns that its destruction is imminent. He comes as both deliverer and agent of judgment. He is Lord of the temple (and thus of creation) and its caretaker, just as Adam was called both to exercise dominion and serve creation.

Jesus’ intention, however, has not been simply to make a spectacularly suspenseful and ironic entry into the city. He now proceeds to his real goal, the temple – in particular, the court of the Gentiles, where he performs another spectacular sign-act.

The Old Testament cues that accompany the expulsion of those engaged in temple commerce are drawn from Isaiah: “my Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” This is part of a vision of Jerusalem restored, as a place where Gentiles - that is “the nations” - gather for prayer alongside the outcasts of Israel. These words challenge the priests who have made the temple unsuitable for such prayer.

The second line of Jesus’ statement comes from Jeremiah’s scathing temple sermon directed against those who appeal to the temple for safety while engaging in theft, murder, adultery, and idolatry. Jeremiah goes on to prophesy the destruction of the temple. When Jesus overturns the tables, he is not condemning the merchants or accusing them of being dishonest. Pilgrims travelled long distances to offer their

sacrifices at the Temple. It would be most inconvenient and cumbersome to bring their sacrifices on such a long journey. So it was normal practice for the merchants to offer this service.

Rather than a complaint against the merchants, Jesus' action was a critique of the *practice of worship*, the false piety that the Temple exemplified. It was a pious hideout that ignored the sick, the poor, the outcasts and the needy. It was a critique of the *facade of piety*. Jesus turns the Temple into a place of healing. Jesus' kingship is expressed by his life-giving actions in response to the crowds' "hoshiyana" or "Save us!"

The priests are understandably angry as they feel threatened when even the children are heard to shout: "Praise God for the son of David." The priests' reaction is a bit odd when they ask Jesus if he has heard what the children are saying. And again Matthew has Jesus quoting from one of the Old Testament psalms: "You have taught children and nursing infants to give you praise." This new, unexpected kingship is one that heals instead of exploiting. This king saves instead of oppressing, and it seems that even the children see this, unlike the priests blinded by their arrogance and false piety.

There is new evidence that there were actually two processions that day in Jerusalem. Jesus' parade was the counter-procession, stealing the pomp from Pilate's ceremonial procession. The Roman battalion, was solemnly advancing through the western Damascus Gate, on the Syrian Road. Awesome stallions: clanging hooves against the paving stones; gleaming metal lances; swords, dirks, helmets; polished leather armour; saddles, boots, drums.

Pilate was marching his men because the Jewish Feast Days were beginning and that stirred a restlessness in the people. He was sending

a message, any trouble would be crushed. The Pax Romana, Caesar's peace, would be enforced.

At the Beautiful Gate on the opposite side of town, coming in through an olive grove, rode Jesus, alone, sitting on a donkey, one leg draped over her colt, someone's old cloak under him. Laughter and foolishness brought travellers together into a waving crowd, good naturedly throwing branches in the rutted path. This gate, legend held, was the one through which the Shekinah brought the Sabbath each Friday at sundown, and the gate through which the Messiah would one day come. Shekinah in Jewish and Christian theology, is the glory of the divine presence, conventionally represented as light or interpreted symbolically as a divine feminine aspect.

Scholars say that it was for this procession that they arrested him. Whatever trouble he made among the sellers at the Temple was a Jewish problem, not a Roman one. But this counter-procession, this mockery of Pilate that drew a huge throng and filled the city with laughter, was intolerable.

"Who's this?" the crowds asked, wanting to know the source of this rippling laughter, this derring-do. When you want to call a dragon out of its cave, you can use many voices as your megaphone, their echoing laughter roaring its name for you. You can break solemn silence with laughter. Nothing will keep the dragon from coming out to see, "Who dares to laugh at me?" You can stand before the dragon, not in awe. And that will pierce it as well as any sword.

Luke says Jesus stopped on the way in, to weep a little for the city, saying, "If only you had known the way that leads to peace - but no, it is hidden from your sight." John says he had a wrenching break with Judas the night before. Matthew says the arrangements about the donkey were

made in secret. There is a trail of tears and danger behind this entry, this sad and smiling man who takes no sword, no lance, no drum as he rides on to slay the Dragon.

Hosanna! The crowds of travelling pilgrims shout, families, kids, grandparents, all on their way to Temple Days. But to whom are they shouting? Most don't even know his name. He's touched a dream they share, of a different time. Some want a Pilate with different politics. Some want the empire of their dreams. Some want a new Elijah, some a new Solomon. Some don't know what they want, really. And nor do we. But who doesn't want a little glory? Even the disciples are confused about what is happening, about what Jesus is doing now.

But the Dragon is more than Pilate and his Legion. The Dragon is larger than Caesar and his army. The Dragon is Human Fear, and Power NOT born of Love. The Dragon is kingdoms not made of grace and peace, but of dollars and resignation, ambivalence and bondage.

"I came," he said in the beginning, "to bring good news to the poor, release to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim God's favourable time." Every day we wonder what he meant, and if it could possibly be enough. "Who is this?" We still want to know. And we have a list of names, none of which honour what he said he came to do.

Innocent Victim is not his name, he who chose his confrontations and forgave his persecutors. Unrecognized is not his name, when crowds shouted Hosanna. Betrayed is not his name when he taught that this is the Way to be Human. Perfect is not his name when he flaunted so many rules, cured a fig tree, hung around with prostitutes, prayed to have his fate reversed, and in so many other ways was as fully human as we are. Without Sin is not the point he was making with his life.

These names ring true: Jesus, Jew; Jesus, Jester; Jesus, Teacher; Jesus, Man of Sorrows; Jesus, Beloved; Jesus, Ark for the Poor of the World; Jesus, Shepherd; Jesus, Light; Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom. At the end, the Dragon's Cave will be empty. Death will no longer breathe fire. And the end of the day will no longer be the day's end.

After two thousand years we may have forgotten that the church itself is God's prophetic sign-act, a living spectacle meant to reveal Christ's humble dominion and to bring blessing to the world. At times the Church is a sign of judgment, at times of redemption, but always a people through whom God's intentions for restoration of heaven and earth are made known in the most spectacular ways.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR APRIL 2, 2023 - PALM SUNDAY

Today we begin Holy Week, walking the Via Dolorosa with Jesus of Nazareth...sitting at the table at the Last Supper, watching and waiting in Gethsemane's garden, seeing with horror and dread the arrest and torture and trials, and finally, weeping at the foot of the cross. But today, Gracious God, we lay the branches on the ground to make a path. The road to walk within our questions, joy, sorrow, worry, fear, rest, anguish and delight. A mosaic of green in winter placed at the feet of our hearts which hold awareness of so much.

Praise God! **Hosanna in the highest.**

We pray for children, teachers, and staff in the United States who suffer and die in yet another senseless shooting. We pray for the grieving, we pray with our exhausted anger for change in mental health support, gun control laws and healing to the deep tap roots of violence. As we look around our world - O God, your world - as we open our eyes and ears and hearts, we become aware of the many situations which demand our attention, our intervention, our words... so why are we so often silent? Help us to break our silence.

Praise God! **Hosanna in the highest.**

Wars, rage, and hopes for peace talks in Ukraine are dimming. The people of South Sudan continue to live in fear and flee their homes, with little hope of ever returning, yet we remain silent. And, in our own country, and throughout the world, refugees are being treated, not with welcome, but with anger and resentment, as hospitality is pushed aside, replaced by fear of the other. Where is our outrage, O God, as so many of us remain silent?

Praise God! **Hosanna in the highest.**

Everywhere we look, the mistreatment of girls and women continues with the longing and plight of girls like Habiba, Mahtab and Tamana in Afghanistan, who simply and deeply want to go to school. And for Matilluah Wesa, an activist with Pen Path, a mobile school and library that travels through Afghanistan, who was detained this week.

Praise God! **Hosanna in the highest.**

Triumphant God Help us to break our silence.

We pray for those searching for survivors in the mud after landslides in Ecuador where entire families are missing. Our hearts go to Turkey and Syria where 1,400 bodies have yet to be identified and families still wait to hear news of their loved ones. We pray for those whose lives spun this week in tornados in the United States. Comfort those shocked in grief who are holding the shards of the lives they so recently knew. May they feel You with them profoundly.

Praise God! **Hosanna in the highest!**

We pray for our relationship with the earth – our home, our kin. May justice of increased pay come for miners, that include children, in the Democratic Republic of Congo who are digging cobalt, an essential commodity for electric cars, but who are exposed daily to toxic waste and are paid mere pennies for their labours.

Praise God! **Hosanna in the highest.**

We pray that the ongoing work of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples experiences a surge of hope, momentum and commitment after the recent announcement of the Catholic Church to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery that gave sanction to the colonization of indigenous peoples and their lands these past 500+ years. Give courage to leaders to bring needed systemic changes about that will ensure self-determination and dignity to Indigenous peoples in future years.

Praise God! **Hosanna in the highest.**

We pray for those in need, for the ill, for those in hospital, and for those healing from treatments and surgeries, and those burdened with any other ailments or problems ... Compassionate God, give your strength and healing to all those who are sad, lonely, or unwell in mind, body or spirit ... and bless all those who are offering support and are trying to help them.

Praise God! **Hosanna in the highest.**

We pray for those who have died ... God of hope, we thank you that not even death can separate us from your love. We pray for all who mourn, that they may feel your care for them.

Praise God! **Hosanna in the highest.**

We weave palm branches into a cross - a cross that holds the promise of the full story of life-death-life. We stand in awe at the beauty woven through the agony. Without fanfare we witness the grace of first responders, those holding the weeping and making them food, those around the world daily making small and mighty change in the ways they can towards the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.

Praise God! **Hosanna in the highest.**

We pray for ourselves, all that we will do this week, and all those we will meet ... Loving God, we give this week into your hands. Be with us in all that we will do. May we enjoy the spiritual journey of this week and learn and grow in it.

Praise God! **Hosanna in the highest.**

Lord of Mercy and Daring ... Give us the courage to speak out for those who have no voice, for those forgotten by our world, for those who need someone to speak for them. And let us do it in the name of the One who spoke with his life for us – Jesus the Christ who taught us to pray ...

Our Father ...