

A Tale of Two Kingdoms
April 12, 2025
Palm Sunday

So, tomorrow is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. If you grew up in the church like I did, you probably remember children parading into the church with palm branches, shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Maybe you were one of those children. Back then, Palm Sunday had a kind of warm, cheery feeling, like a birthday party. It was a celebration, a day to gather in God’s house and give Jesus the praise and adoration he deserves.

If someone had told me back then that the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem was actually a subversive act – more of a protest than a party – I would have been astonished. But according to the Gospel, the Triumphal Entry was just such a subversive act. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was an act of – call it “political theater” – designed to mock the pomp and power of Rome.

You see, the Triumphal Entry of Jesus wasn’t the only procession entering Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. As Jesus entered the city, coming down the Mount of Olives from the east, there was another parade entering from the west. Every year, the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, would ride up from his residence on the Mediterranean, for the Jewish Passover – a festival that swelled the population of Jerusalem from its usual 50,000 or so, to more than 200,000.

But Pilate wasn't there to worship the Jewish God. The governor would come in all his imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims just who was in charge. The Jews were free to celebrate their escape from Egypt if they wanted, but lest anyone be inspired to rise up against Roman rule, there would be plenty of troops on hand to squash the protest.

So, on one side of the city a rabbi from Nazareth was riding into town on a donkey, while a rag-tag rabble of peasants and fishermen waved branches and shouted hosanna. On the other side of the city was a parade of imperial power: Cavalry, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, gold eagles mounted on poles. The air was filled with the sound of marching feet, creaking leather, beating drums.

There were people watching that parade too. But there were no hosannas. Most of the crowd was not happy. You see, according to Roman propaganda, the emperor – Caesar – was more than just the ruler of Rome; he was a god! He was the “son of god”. That was the official line. So, for the crowds watching Pilate's arrival, this was more than just a show of power; it was a violation of everything they believed. It was armed heresy on horseback.

And this is the background to the story of Palm Sunday. We know from the Gospels that Jesus planned his Triumphal Entry. Jesus knew he was going to enter the city on the back of a donkey, just as it was predicted by the prophet Zechariah:

a king “mounted on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass”. And Jesus knew it would happen on the same day that Pilate arrived.

So, while all the pomp and power of this world was entering Jerusalem from the west, Jesus was riding into the city from the east. Now 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 message? Did they understand the symbolism?

I suspect they did not. They really weren’t interested in symbols; most of the folks in the crowd were looking for something more tangible – an uprising, a revolt. They wanted a great king, a military leader like David, who would drive out the Romans and restore Israel to its former glory. They were looking for a Messiah to make Israel great again. What they got was a king on a donkey.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Jesus’ little act of political theater led directly to his death on the cross. Crucifixion, you see, was a Roman punishment for sedition and rebellion. Jesus knew what he was doing. He knew what it would cost for him to tweak the Roman nose. He understood that humor can be serious business, especially when it points to truths we would rather not see.

Am I exaggerating? Do you think I’m off the wall? Notice how this conflict, this face-off between two kings, two authorities, two gods, winds its way through the whole Passion story. Notice how the story comes to a climax in that

face-to-face confrontation of Jesus and Pilate. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate sneers. “You say so,” Jesus replies. “But my kingdom is not like yours. My kingdom is not of this world?”

“So, you are a king?” says Pilate. But Jesus makes no further reply. The last ironic twist in this clash between Pilate and Jesus comes in the letters written on the cross: “INRI” – Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum – “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” – a last little bit of sarcasm: A king on a cross. Little did Pilate understand the truth of those words.

Jesus died because he came to announce the Kingdom of God – a kingdom not like Caesar’s – a kingdom of peace, a kingdom of justice, a kingdom of radical and subversive freedom; a kingdom dramatically different from all the powers and authorities of this world. Jesus died because he exposed the sham at the heart of all earthly power, all human presumption. Even when he knew that it would cost him his life, he set his face “like flint” towards Jerusalem. Even when he knew it would lead to the cross, he mounted a donkey and rode into the city.

Two parades. Two kingdoms. Two gods. Reflect on the story of those two kingdoms, those two lords, and ask yourselves: Which one do we follow? Which one do we choose? Amen.