

Two Parades

A Sermon for Palm Sunday

When [Jesus and his disciples] were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, [he] sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! 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!" Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. — Mark 11:1-11

On Palm Sunday, (at least in non-pandemic years), we Christians are all on parade processing with palms in memory of the spectacle that Jesus organized for his final entry into Jerusalem. There's something quite compelling about parades and there are all kinds of them. My personal favorite is the one our local fire department stages for our town every summer. Until the last few years, I've been in charge of lining up all the floats and marchers before the exhibition gets underway.

Maybe they gave me that job as fire department chaplain because it involves not just traffic control but a little diplomacy as well. For example, you couldn't put the fire and ambulance units too close to the nursing home float or there would be complaints that the sirens were too loud or that the exhaust from the big trucks was making the elders sick. The horsey entrants to the cavalcade, I was always reminded, had to be closely followed by shovel and barrel contingents. But the most important thing to remember was to make certain that one perennial entrant, the town's only garbage truck, was put at the very end of the line of procession. No one wanted to be stuck swatting flies while marching behind that odiferous entry!

Because these delicate duties put me at the rear of the procession once the panoply finally got underway, I always hitched a ride on the infamous garbage truck. From this lofty perch I would proudly wave to the parade-watchers along the route and especially to the parade judges as we passed the 'official stand, 'a picnic table on the lawn of the local gravel and stone contractor. There's something I love about riding in the one, perennial, unwashed entry that I could be certain would never win the prize for the best float in town!

Perhaps I'm attracted to this anti-parade aspect of our local event because parades so often appeal to the pompous, pretentious, grandiose side of human nature. They are processions meant to inspire and impress, much like the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, complete with war horses and military guard, that the Roman governor Pontius Pilate staged every year just before the high Jewish festival got under way. (cf. Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week*, 2006, pp. 1-30)

So there were *two* parades to watch as Passover approached in Jerusalem in year 30 of the Common Era: one, a triumphal march featuring the local tyrant in all his threatening grandeur. The other, by contrast, was the parade that Jesus chose to stage, featuring not war horses and clanking armor but a humble donkey and

people's shouts of hope and thanksgiving. *Anyone* was welcome to join in Jesus' procession, but for Pontus Pilate's military display, *everyone* was expected to stand back and be intimidated. There was nothing impressive about the poor man's pack animal that Jesus rode except to remind us all of the ancient prophecy that a king would come in all humility to establish peace and justice even to the very ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

The purpose of Jesus' demonstration was to turn the world's idea of what was most important upside down. His procession signaled that power is given to us for the purpose of serving people, not for securing one's personal position over others. His teaching and example put the focus on the neighbor instead of on the self. He challenged us to imagine a new community based on mutual respect, animated by a lively sense of the common good, and adorned by a spirit of sacrificial self-giving. Jesus entered Jerusalem and, at the cost of his life, brought home to us the truths that evil is real but goodness is stronger, that destructive power and raw violence can be faced with steadfast integrity and courageous love, that sacrificial suffering has profound meaning and that death, in the end, is never truly the end.

Few people fully understood that deeper message back then and too often I fail to embrace it as the core meaning of my life today. There are times when my march through life looks like the triumphal procession of some petty dignitary, as if God were really pleased with me as I march from one hollow success to the next like some self-important conquerer. Most of the time I don't even believe in myself when I'm acting this way. It's my fears and insecurities that compel me to pose for others as if I'm perfectly self-sufficient, highly competent and ever-successful. It's a cunning artifice that's all about me. It's a false, dominating way to go through life, and I know it.

I want to step out of that pompous cavalcade of power-worshippers and self-aggrandizers marching in the spirit of Pilate through this world. I need to get off my own war horse and join Jesus' donkey-led counter-procession. I long to lay down my cloak in honor of his humble, alternative way. I yearn to raise my branch in solidarity with Christ's far more compelling message: that who God wants me to be is much more authentic and powerful than any shaky string of supposed successes I might craft for myself in order to justify my own existence.

Which parade will it be for you? In the procession that streams through your life, will you play the role of puffed-up, self-constructed hero riding a warhorse for

Pilate or, will you find true life by following that humble donkey and becoming a servant in the example of Jesus?

Let this be our prayer:

Gracious Lord, knock me off my high horse that I might see my life as your generous gift and not as my personal conquest. Humble Jesus, organize your compassionate parade through my life. I lay down whatever I have before you. I follow behind you on your triumphant path of self-giving service and love. I sing Hosannahs to you, all along the way.

Amen.

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