

Triumphal Entries

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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When Jesus had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading 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, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." - Luke 19:29-40

Pontius Pilate always showed up in Jerusalem for the Passover. He didn't show up because he was Jewish or devout. He showed up because it was his job.

It was Pilate's job to keep the peace—or at least peace on his terms, which meant keeping the native Jews in line by brute strength and intimidation. To get a feel for how Pilate viewed and treated his Jewish subjects, consider the present iron hand of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu toward Palestinians.

Tens of thousands of religious pilgrims converged in Jerusalem for the Passover. They came to celebrate the freeing of God's people from an oppressive regime. Pilate showed up to remind all that that was then, this is now. Present day fantasies of freedom were futile. Rome was fully in charge.

Pilate did not mainly live in Jerusalem. His primary residence was at the seashore, forty miles to the west. Imagine for a moment how his entry into Jerusalem was staged to trumpet Rome's absolute power: *"the cavalry and foot soldiers, the armor and plumed helmets, the weapons and banners ... the marching feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust."*

This is the Triumphal Entry of Pilate as envisioned by the scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg in their 2006 book titled, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem*. Crossan and Borg propose that Jesus knew all about Pilate's annual Triumphal Entry for the Passover. Jesus knew that Pilate would enter the city from the direction of his residence, through the city's magnificent West Gate. Jesus, you'll remember from last Sunday's gospel, had recently been in Bethany, to the east. Jesus would have entered the city through its more modest East Gate.

Borg and Crossan imagine that Jesus orchestrated his own deliberately modest parade to directly coincide with Pilate's magnificent and threatening display of power -- *"a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor."* Crossan notes that Jesus rode *"the most unthreatening, most un-military mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her."*

The first gospel text we heard this morning ends with a dialog between some Pharisees and Jesus. But the more ominous and important dialogue here may be unspoken, a dialog between Jesus and Pilate, between worldly power that enforces false peace through fear and aggression and the powerlessness of God, in Christ, that brings the only true and lasting peace.

Some scholars challenge the theories of Crossan and Borg with regard to these dual triumphal entries. I haven't delved into the evidence. Whether or not all historical details are in line, I can imagine rising 10,000 feet above and looking down on Jerusalem. I invite you to join me there, at a height from which we can see the competing powers and claims that continue to define our world, that continue to be played out at border crossings, in revolutions, in militarism and also through and behind the fortified walls of our own individual personas and lives and hearts.

Entering through the main gate: the powers and principalities of the world in all their regalia and allure—our own big and little thrills of power, being *in the room where it happens*, carrying the 'it' bag, dropping a name, perfectly timed, imagining we are nothing if we haven't built a lasting legacy, preempting the hopes of someone else because we have the power to do so. Or maybe we don't know much about privilege but sure wish we had more, because so much of our culture and the world tells us that in order to be happy and successful and safe, we'll need more, more, more.

And then, coming in through the back gate, sometimes awkwardly, often taking us by surprise, unsettling us: another way, One who comes in powerless humility. He exposes so much of what we strive for as a farce, an illusion. He shows how the good life as we define it so often crucifies our creativity or freedom or generosity or requires that we view and treat others as a threat, as 'less than.' Jesus invites us to follow him in overcoming the world, but only after being apparently crushed by it.

All of this was already in my mind at noon on Friday, when Brooke and I were up at Loyola University to take part in an awards luncheon. The honoree was a friend and fellow priest, Mark McIntosh. By any standard, he has an impressive resume: undergrad degree from Yale, MDiv from General Seminary in New York (where I met him) and his doctorate in theology from Oxford. He's considered to be a world-class scholar on the theology of mysticism. His award was well-deserved.

Mark also has ALS, or Lou Gehrig's Disease. He can no longer use his legs or feet or arms or hands, except that if his wife Anne lifts and places his right hand on the arm of his complicated hi-tech wheelchair he can still move himself around.

For all of this, Mark still has a fiery, loving sparkle in his eyes, in which I have often seen Christ. He was able to make the last remarks on Friday. As he slowly, awkwardly backed his wheelchair up in front of his many Jesuit scholar-colleagues and others, I couldn't help but think of Jesus entering the East Gate of Jerusalem.

Mark spoke without notes about four things: Desire, Goodness, Language and Communion. He did so with such insight and humanity; I and many others were awed and moved to tears. At one point he said, "*Words are eminently necessary but woefully insufficient*" for the meaning they are intended to convey. The truest words, Mark said '*must be enlivened [for us] by the reality to which the language points.*'

You and I have heard so many words today, and we will share so many more words in the lengthy liturgies of this coming week. All of these words are meant to tell all-important stories on a cosmic scale. When they are *enlivened by the reality to which the language points*, as Mark McIntosh would say, they also expose the primary dilemmas of our human condition, yours and mine our own allegiances and choices. These words become the processions that parade through the gates of our hearts and lives vying for our allegiance, seeking to define for us what it means to be human, to live worthily. These words can illumine the right and wrong uses of our power and our love.

These words can even compel us to follow Jesus through the gate that will inevitably lead to death because we have come to believe that thereby we will learn true life and true peace. *Amen.*