

Sunday of the Passion / Palm Sunday March 20, 2016
Text – Luke 19:28-40 (John 12:12-19)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The first Palm Sunday was an amazing event, a spectacle really – a spectacle in which Jesus made a dramatic and triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In John’s Gospel, it says a “great crowd” greeted Jesus (John 12:12, NRSV).

In Luke’s Gospel, today’s processional text, it’s reported that a “whole multitude of the disciples,” (certainly more than just the twelve!) “began to praise God joyfully” on this occasion (Luke 19:37, NRSV).

And Matthew’s Gospel speaks of multiple crowds – “crowds that went ahead of him and that followed,” and in addition to those, “a very large crowd,” who “spread their cloaks” and their “cut branches from the trees” on the road in order to honor Jesus (Matthew 21:8, 9, NRSV).

Despite our likely familiarity with these events of Palm Sunday, we still may not have an adequate conception of its magnitude. Jesus’ arrival in the ancient and holy city of Jerusalem was a large, tumultuous, and chaotic event – a commotion of significant impact and importance.

But remember that the Hebrew day of rest and quiet was the Old Testament Sabbath, which fell on Saturday, the seventh day of the week.

So the Sunday on which Jesus entered Jerusalem was therefore the equivalent to our Monday – and a busy Monday it was, indeed.

It was the beginning of another work week, but this time it was also the week immediately preceding the great Passover Sabbath, an event which annually brought thousands of religious pilgrims into Jerusalem.

An already crowded and busy city was even more thickly teeming and swarming with people, and they were in a fever pitch of excitement and activity.

The word was out – there’s even more to be excited about – a great prophet is soon to arrive. Jesus of Nazareth, the master teacher, the amazing miracle worker, is about to enter Jerusalem.

Large numbers of people go out to hail and greet him, and they place their garments and palm branches in the road before him in acts of honor and devotion, in expressions of respect and praise.

“Hosanna!” they shout, “Praise God!” as they hail him as their Messianic King – though their understanding of that title was likely far different than what Jesus intended – but more about that later.

(Literally, the word “hosanna” means “save now.”) “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel! (John 12:13, NRSV)”

But what of this King Himself? What does He look like? How does He come to His people in this hour of fleeting triumph? Does He wear the royal purple and the royal crown? Does He ride in a regal chariot, or perhaps upon a magnificent war horse? Is He escorted by a military guard of honor?

These questions were all answered centuries before, when an inspired messenger of God by the name of Zechariah described this scene in a prophetic vision. Nearly 500 years before it happened, Zechariah had said and written:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey
(Zechariah 9:9, NRSV).

But why the donkey? Fulfillment of prophecy – Zechariah had foretold it. But there’s a lot more to this than just slavish compliance with an ancient, if admittedly sacred, writing. Zechariah’s prophecy was one of peace.

Zechariah prophesied that all the accoutrements of war could be eliminated because they wouldn’t even be needed. The messianic king to come would be an agent of justice and righteousness, of harmony and unity.

Jesus planned his entrance into Jerusalem upon a donkey as a declaration of his fulfillment of the role of the Prince of Peace.

But knowing, as we do, how this week will end, we feel the tension between Jesus’ Palm Sunday arrival as “The Prince of Peace” and the violent fate he would literally suffer just five days later on a cross on Good Friday.

That tension was found in that Zechariah text which I quoted earlier. How often do you suppose that the adjectives, *triumphant* and *victorious*, descriptive of Jesus, are placed in parallel usage with the word, *humble*, also descriptive of Jesus?

“Triumphant and victorious” appear to have more in common with conquest and success than they do with humility – except perhaps in the case of Jesus, and this is pointed out quite well in today’s Second Reading (Philippians 2:5-11, NRSV).

None of the Gospels suggest that Jesus was adorned as an earthly king when he entered Jerusalem. He came to his people that first Palm Sunday attired with simple dignity in his homespun clothes.

Oh, yes, this was a king coming to his people as the Prince of Peace, a king, yet meek and lowly, humble, coming to them in gentleness – and before long, he would be revealed in all his omnipotent might!

So often, when we examine the life of Jesus, we discover paradox, we find tension, we come upon the utterly unexpected. His life is one divine surprise after another. “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey....”

It is something that some of us have never understood. It is something that we all need to remember – the humility, the meekness of him whom we have learned to know as Lord of Lords, our Savior King.

It was Jesus who said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5, NRSV). It is Jesus who has revealed the might that lies in meekness, the power concealed in humility.

That day in Jerusalem there was indeed a triumphal procession in which Jesus was honored and adored – but it did not end at the city hall.

There was no reception for Jesus in the palace of King Herod; and Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator, had not extended for Jesus a welcome mat, or a red carpet. They would deal with him later.

Jesus found his real reception where he does still today – in the hearts of humble people whom the Holy Spirit has moved to believe in the power and love of God. For God loved, and he gave, and Jesus came “that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

Before this week is over, he who came in royal meekness will once again be made to wear a crown of thorns. Once again, in the memory of all Christendom, Jesus will rise to power as he ascends the throne of the cross, and unveils glory from an empty tomb! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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