

The crown, then the cross

The sixth in a series of seven sermons for the season of Lent

Luke 19:28-40; 23:21

Everybody loves a parade and a party. There's Macy's parade on Thanksgiving. The Rose Bowl Parade on New Year's Day, and many other local and national parades throughout the year. It's festive to see the flowers, bands, and floats, but there is something very different about the parade on Palm Sunday.

It is said by the experts who know the First Century AD that a six-year-old girl could carry a sack of gold from Athens to Rome and not be robbed or injured in any way. That's several hundred miles. That's terrible because it means it was like North Korea is today. A very harsh military situation. The roads that the Romans built were not like the roads we have. They were not roads for trade and commerce. They were roads for moving soldiers around. It was soldiers everywhere. An Occupied Zone.

When you think of these people gathered on that Palm Sunday, think of a soldier every hundred feet. The Centuria in that time were squadrons of eighty soldiers who would be watching. And then in the public square in front of the temple there would be a couple of cohorts of soldiers (530 soldiers in a cohort). It means that there were over 1,000 soldiers posted in Jerusalem all the time watching to see that the people didn't get out of line.

What were they, these crazy Jewish people, doing? Here is somebody riding in ordinary clothes on a donkey. The people were throwing their cloaks on the ground like a red carpet, and they were ripping large palm branches off the trees to provide a pathway for the one who in their understanding was King David come back again. That was reflected by a prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 that David when he came again to restore his empire would be humble and come riding this way.

What was the Occupation like? Not only were the Jewish people without any rights whatsoever, unless they were Roman citizens, but they were taxed. It was not only taxes, but also that those who collected taxes were, without exception, corrupt. The tax collectors had soldiers with them so they could collect the taxes and whatever more they could get for themselves. There was corruption. And the soldiers were non-religious as far as the Jewish religion was concerned. The soldiers polluted the

temple, polluted life, because they didn't live according to God's commands in the Hebrew religion.

It was a very different scene. When the people shouted: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," they shouted in Hebrew. The Roman soldiers didn't speak Hebrew. They probably thought: It's these crazy Hebrew people again. As long as they don't riot or start to overthrow the authorities, we just have to keep them in line.

What's important with this whole account is that a few days later, this same crowd who shouted "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" now shout, as it says in John 19:17: "We have no king but Caesar."

How did that happen? What a contrast. Absolutely the opposite. We can understand that a little bit if we look at the account in the Gospel of John where Jesus comes before Pilate, and Pilate asks him: "Are you the King of the Jews?" And Jesus' answers: "For this purpose I have into the world, but my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:37).

We misunderstand that statement because we use the word "world" in a different way that the writer of John does. It doesn't mean "spiritual" over against "material." In the Gospel of John the word "world" means those who are opposed to God.

When Jesus says: "My kingdom is not of this world," he doesn't mean something spiritual. It's true he also said that if need be, "my Father will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels" (Matthew 26:53). That would be over 60,000. We have the idea of some kind of spiritual experience here, but it's not what's meant.

What's meant is "this is a greater kingdom," including the kingdom you think about as the kingdom of David. But the kingdom which includes everything.

It's exactly parallel to the account in the sixth chapter of John of the feeding of the 5,000. The people were very happy. That was 5,000 males. With the women and children that would be about 20,000 of them. He was performing miracles, feeding them bread and fish. It was exactly what the Romans called bread and circuses. They were very happy. And then Jesus disappeared and went somewhere else, and when his disciples found him, they asked: "Why did you do that?"

He answered: "You don't get it. You don't get what this this kingdom is about." He says in John 6:35: "I am the bread of life." They object. How can that be? It goes on to say: "I am the one who brings life through the Holy Spirit."

When Jesus says that in John 6:63, most people left him. All that were left were the twelve. The rest wanted bread and circuses. They wanted their own idea of the kingdom. In John 6:68 Jesus asks the twelve: "Are you going to leave, too? Peter answers, "No. To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

That's exactly as we have it in John 8:31: "If you hear my word . . . , you shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free." It goes on to say: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (8:36).

As we begin Holy Week with this celebration of the King who comes, we remember that he comes humbly and riding on a little donkey. Is it a joke? How can he be king?

We remember how fickle were the people, including the disciples. Those who cheered him on early in the week turned on him by Friday. The chants of "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" early in the week turned into chants of "Crucify, crucify him!" (Luke 23:21) on Friday. Even his disciples denied that they knew him; they all deserted him.

We are like them. We flinch from him. We flee; we deny him. We do it, too. If we cannot say we did it, too, then he did not die for us. As the hymn ("Ah, Holy Jesus") confesses:

"Who was the guilty?
Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason,
Jesus, hath undone thee.
'Twas I, Lord Jesus,
I it was denied thee.
I crucified thee.

He knows we betray him, but he takes up the cross anyway. He bears our sins in his body.

We look forward to celebrating Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter because there the one who wears the crown of thorns is the one who also brings the crown of life, and we look forward with that hope and that promise. Amen