

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

A Sermon for Palm Sunday

Everybody loves a parade. There is Macy's Parade on Thanksgiving Day, the Rose Bowl Parade on New Year's Day. Parades all over the country on the Fourth of July. The floats, the horses, the bands, and drum majorettes. It's fun to be in a parade and watch a parade.

All of that has its place, but there's something very different about the parade which took place on that first Palm Sunday long ago. It is said by the experts who know the First Century A. D. 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.

Think of that. That's several hundred miles. You'd have to go north, then south again around the Adriatic. A long, hard journey. It means it was like North Korea is today. A brutally harsh military situation. The roads the Romans built were not roads like we have today, roads for trade and travel, for commerce. Those roads were to move soldiers around. It was soldiers everywhere. An occupied zone.

When you think of these people gathered on Palm Sunday, try to imagine soldiers everywhere. We know the word "centurion." A centurion was a Roman commander over "a century" (a subdivision of a Roman legion), that is, over 100 soldiers. Soldiers were everywhere, and they were watching. And then in the Square in front of the temple there would be even more soldiers, 500 or more. Think of that scene: There would have been over 1000 soldiers posted all the time to make sure that the people didn't get out of line.

What were those crazy Jewish people doing? They were watching this person ride on a donkey. They were throwing their shawls on the ground, making their version of a red carpet. They were ripping palms off the trees, not small palms like we have but palms 3-4 feet tall. They were providing a pathway for the one whom they thought was King David come back again.

That was reflected by a prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 that says when he would come again, when he would bring back his empire, he would come in a humble way, come riding this way, on a donkey.

What was life under the occupation like? Not only were the people without any rights, unless they were Roman citizens, but they were also heavily taxed. And those who collected taxes were corrupt. When they came for your taxes, your money, they brought soldiers with them, and the whole lot of them took what they could get for themselves. And

those tax collectors and soldiers weren't religious at all. They polluted life; they polluted the temple because they didn't live as God had commanded in the Hebrew religion.

It was a tense, volatile scene. When the people shouted "Hosanna!" – of course in Hebrew – the Roman soldiers wouldn't understand it. The soldiers thought it's just these crazy Hebrew people again, and as long as they don't start a riot or try to overthrow the authority, their parade could be tolerated. The soldiers just had to keep them in line.

What's important in this account is, as you know, that a few days later these same people, this same crowd who was shouting: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," a few days later, as it says in John 19:15, that same crowd said: "We have no king but Caesar." How did that happen?

How did it happen that in a few days these same people could be so fickle, so absolutely the opposite of what they were a few days earlier?

We can understand that a bit when we see in the Gospel of John that when Jesus comes before Pilate and Pilate asks him: "Are you the king of the Jews?" his answer was: "For this purpose, I came into the world, but my kingdom is not of this world."

We misunderstand that statement because we use the word "world" in a different way than 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.

Therefore, when he says: "My kingdom is not of this world," he doesn't mean something spiritual. It's true he also says in Matthew 26:53: "If need be, my father would at once send more than twelve legions of angels." That would be over 60,000 angels. We may have the idea that some kind of immense spiritual experience is meant.

But what it really means is that this is a greater kingdom, including the kingdom that you and I think about as the kingdom of David. This greater kingdom includes everything.

It's exactly parallel to the account we have in the 6th chapter of John about the feeding of the 5,000. That means 5,000 males; so, with the women and children, that would be about 20,000 people. A huge event. He was performing miracles and feeding them. It was exactly what the Romans called bread and circuses. They were very happy.

And then Jesus disappeared and went somewhere else. And then the disciples went and found him and said: "Why did you do that?" And he said: "You don't get it. You don't get what this kingdom is about." It 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 he says that in John 6:63, it says: Most people left him. They wanted bread and circuses, something that was their own idea of the kingdom. The only ones left were the Twelve.

Then in John 6:68 it says he said to the Twelve: “Well, are you going to leave, too?” Peter answers “No.” “To whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

That’s exactly what we have in the 8th chapter of John, where it says: “If you hear my word, you shall know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32) It goes on to say: “If the Son has made you free, you are free indeed” (John 8:36).

We begin Holy Week with the king who comes, but he comes in a different way, humbly and riding on a small donkey.

We look forward to Maundy 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.

We look forward with that hope and that promise.

Amen