

We have made it today to the start of Holy week. We all know the story of Palm Sunday. The day where Jesus is the star of his parade. Where the crowds adore him and he is shown the respect and glory he deserves.

This is the culmination of his ministry>

We know that what is coming later in the week, but today -we celebrate the glorious king that Jesus is.

But did you know that there were 2 processions that day into Jerusalem?

In the east of the city was Jesus, on his donkey and the adoring fans.

But on the other side, on the west of the city was another procession. Pontius Pilate.

In the year 30 AD, Roman historians record that the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, led a procession of Roman cavalry and centurions into the city of Jerusalem. (The Last Week, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, p.1)

Imagine this procession for a moment.

Pontius Pilate leads in a troop of Roman soldier, on foot and on horseback. Drummers are beating out the sound of marching for the procession to step in time with. Each soldier is clad in polished leather armour. Each centurion or commander wearing a shiny metal helmet, and shiny swords hanging from their hips. They also carried spears or bows, flags and banners.

This was no ordinary entry into Jerusalem. Pilate was the governor of the region that included Judea, and it was customary for a Roman governor of a foreign territory to be in the capitol during religious festivities. It was the beginning of Passover, a strange holiday for Rome, but the Romans had allowed it.

The city was full of people, and the holiday that they were celebrating was, after all, all about celebrating liberation of the Jews from foreign rule. Making it all the more important that the current foreign ruler keep a close eye on all that was going on.

The Romans had occupied this land by defeating the Jews and deposing their king about 80 years before, uprisings were always in the air. The last major uprising, long before Pilate's time, had been after the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC.

So for those of you who like history, here are a little politics from that last uprising:

The uprising started in Sepphoris, about 5 miles from Jesus' boyhood home of Nazareth. Before it was over the city of Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee, and the town of Emmaus had been destroyed by the Roman army.

After putting down the rebellion there, the Romans marched on Jerusalem. After pacifying the city, they crucified over 2,000 Jews who were accused of being part of the rebellion. The Romans had made their intolerance for rebellion well-known.

And so, on this occasion, Pilate had traveled with a contingent of Rome's finest from his preferred headquarters in Caesarea-by-the-Sea, to the stuffy, crowded, provincial capital of the Jews, Jerusalem.

The Temple would be the center of Passover activity. Antonia's Fortress, the Roman garrison built adjacent to the Temple compound, would serve as a good vantage point from which to keep an eye on the Jews. Pilate's entry into Jerusalem was meant to send a message to the Jews, and to those who might be plotting against the empire of Rome. The spectacle was meant to remind the Jews of what had happened the last time of a wide-scale uprising. And, it was meant to intimidate the citizens of Jerusalem themselves, who might think twice about joining such a rebellion if it was slated to fail. (Chuck Warnock, April 25 2011, www.churchleaders.com)

So, with this procession happening on one side of the city, it is all the more striking what kind of procession was happening on the other side of the city with Jesus.

If Pilate's procession was meant to demonstrate military power and might, Jesus' procession was demonstrating the exact opposite.

We are told in earlier verses, that the chief priests and Pharisee's had ordered that if anyone see Jesus they were to report him to authorities so he could be arrested.

And yet, Jesus willingly, and not quietly at that, actually rather provocatively enters the city of Jerusalem. This can be seen as a direct threat to the authorities. People were excited and ready stand up and challenge the powers that be.

But then it didn't all happen like that.

First of all, he rode in on a donkey. I always thought the symbol of the donkey was similar to washing of his disciple's feet -humble and servant like. But that's not quite right, I learned. Kings rode donkeys in processions as well. If a king rode a donkey, that meant it was a time of peace. Horses were reserved for the military. So, this act immediately says "I'm not coming here for a fight."

The author of John notes in verse 16, that the disciples did not understand the significance of this until after Jesus was glorified.

But the people were still excited. They sang and hollered. They waved palm branches and laid them down before Jesus to walk over them. It was an entrance for hero's. Hero's, whether they be royalty or war hero's, upon entry into the city would get a parade and people would wave their palm branches, much like when an gold medal Olympian returns home, we great them at the airport with flags and cheers.

Some where excited to see a miracle worker since they had just heard or witnessed the rising of Lazarus from the dead.

Others were wanting a showdown of power and a revolutionary to overthrow the status quo.

They shouted out "Hosanna" (meaning to save or savior), they shouted "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord". They shouted out the words we read together in Psalm 118. They called him "King of Israel".

I would like to note that “King of Israel” is not what Jesus was called at the end of this Holy Week. At Jesus’ trial we will see that he is called “King of the Jews” not “King of Israel”.

The difference is subtle, but significant. There is a crucial social and political difference between these two titles.

It was the Roman occupiers - like Pontius Pilate - who dealt with the elite in the capital city of Jerusalem, located in the region of Judea, who ignored regional differences and referred to the whole population as "Judeans." "Judeans" migrated into English shortened into the first syllable - "Jew."

[The shortening of Judean to Jew] hides from our understanding the scorn that Judeans had for Galileans. Where do the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees come from? Judea. Where does Jesus come from? Galilee.

When Pontius Pilate presents Jesus, the peasant Galilean, as the King of the Judeans - that is outrageous! Crucify him! (Rev. Dr. George Hermanson, March 2012, www.holytextures.com)

But today, on Palm Sunday, he is still King of Israel.

The crowd wants to make Jesus their kind of king -- their expected, national, political messiah. The crowd has laid on Jesus their expectations of who they want him to be. But, Jesus will have no part of it.

I’ve wondered before how the hype of Palm Sunday can dissipate so quickly that in 5 days these same crowds are calling for Jesus’ death, calling to crucify him.

Many in the crowd this day are thinking they are choosing to follow Jesus, they can’t all just be caught up in the mood of the day’s events, some must truly believe in what Jesus represents.

I read a quote about leadership: (Marty Linsky and Ron Heifetz define leadership this way:)

“Leadership is about disappointing your own people at a rate they can absorb.”

After the triumphal entry the crowd began to notice that Jesus was not here to overthrow the government, the new King David wasn't coming. The glory days of Israel were not going to be restored. Jesus was not going to rid the nation of its oppressors and be the benevolent peaceful ruler.

No one wanted or expected Jesus to go willingly to his death. But over the next few days they realized that he wasn't going to be the king that they were expecting. It was beginning to look like another failed messiah. It was beginning to look like defeat.

To go back to that quote about leadership... Jesus was letting down his followers at such a rate that they just couldn't take it in. Even his own disciples couldn't take the pressure and turned on him, one betrayed him, one denied him, and none of them stood up for him. Even those that did stay with him until his death are said to be at a distance (Mark 15:40).

Once the crowds figured out what Jesus was really all about. Once they learned that his kingdom was not an earthly kingdom. Once they learned that actually following Jesus was not going to make their lives easier, in fact it would make their lives harder. They saw the military threat that Rome was and did not want to stir up the wrath of the Empire. They knew Rome would come down hard and fast on them and that this Jesus wasn't going to fight. God's victory here was looking like defeat.

For a very long time after this Holy week happened, hundreds of years, it was dangerous to be a Christian. They were persecuted hard. They were rounded up and put to death, they were the spectacle to be viewed at the gladiator theatre's. “Come watch the pathetic Christians die.”

And yet the early church kept growing. Why on earth would anyone want to join this life threatening band of Jesus following peasants?

For the class I have been taking this winter, I have been reading Alan Kreider's book *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*. It has been a fascinating read if you like history, which I do. The book begins with the earliest records of Christian followers and ends with Constantine adopting Christianity as the state religion during his reign from 312-337 AD.

During those 300 years there were times of peace for the Christians, and there were times of brutal persecution.

So why does someone leave the socially acceptable class to join a despised group of people?

The answers were many, but in its very shortest and crudest form the answer is in the Christians actions. In short, Christianity was a religion of action more than it was a religion of belief, that is at least before Constantine.

Pagans, and Jews looked on at the Christian communities and saw that they lived “in peace.” This peace allowed Christians to handle every aspect of daily living a little different. It changed their business dealings. It changed their social standing/or leveled all social standings. The way Christians took care of each other, and the poor and needy around them, circumvented the current social order, and people noticed.

For example, for the wealthy, one would have to pay a very large sum of money (equivalent to 300+ labourers days wage) to enter into the equivalent to a “life insurance policy.” If you died your funeral and your family would be taken care of. But this club was more like a country club than an insurance agency.

Once you paid your entry fee, then you had to pay your exorbitant annual fee. You were expected to attend parties and contribute wine and food according to your social standing. And if you defaulted on your payments for more than 6 months, your membership was revoked and you would have to apply again with another entrance fee. There was no way out of this club if you were short on money expect to face your financial losses. You even needed 8 people to vouch for your death once you had died so that there was no faking your own death.

But then the Christians, just started offering free funeral services -too anyone. Even to the poor. They collected donations by what people wanted to share willingly and handed it out to whomever needed it. How dare they undermine the system deliberately set up to cater to the rich.

They did this in many areas. They visited prisoners and outcasts. They did away with the Jewish laws of what was clean and what was unclean. Which made eating and doing business with their pagan neighbours possible. It also changed the roles of women and widows, who became the biggest spreader and converter of Christianity. Women and men, young and old, rich and poor were all valued and important parts of the family of God.

The sermon on the mount was one of the highest regarded spiritual texts. They took very seriously the practice of walking the extra mile and turning the other cheek.

Most of the early Christians were not powerful people, but as the church grew some more wealthy and powerful joined the church. Nevertheless, Christians gave off the impression that they were confidently powerful. They believed that “through the Holy Spirit, God had unleashed unimaginable spiritual power for good in the world.” (Kreider, Alen. *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 107)

Christianity was spread by actions, not words. Those who joined did so because they liked how the Christians lived and wanted in. Baptism into the church was a deep inspection into the actions of your life from your family and your neighbours, to see if you had really accepting Jesus’ call and lived Jesus’ commandments. It was not a testimony of your beliefs by your words.

Moving my thoughts to today. I look at those in this world claiming to be Christians, I look at my church, and I look at myself. Am I living Jesus’ commandments? Am I living in a way that my friends and my neighbours and my community notice that I am driven by a different set of priorities, by Jesus’ priorities? Sometimes yes and sometimes no.

A look at the passion and priorities of the early church, even though it too was far from perfect, has helped me reflect on my own actions. How often do I follow the status quo rather than what Jesus would have me do?

That old camp song pops into my head often these days “They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love...”

Let’s go back now to the procession of Palm Sunday. Remember the king of an unearthly kingdom, riding in on his donkey of peace, to claim a victory that doesn’t always look so victorious. We are part of that crowd.

Are we disappointed that this Jesus is not the kind of king that we want or are expecting? A king to make our lives easier, release from oppression, from pain, from sadness?

It is hard to put our expectations for who we want Jesus to be aside. It is hard to walk in Jesus' footsteps. It is hard to follow Jesus' priorities and turn our backs on earthly power and success and victory.

But that is what we are called to do as Christians. Will we stick with Jesus when he doesn't deliver what we want, what we desire, what we think is best? Will we stick with him through Thursday and Friday, through his arrest and trial and death? Can we choose each day love over power?

Will they know we are Christians by our love?

Let me close in a poem.

Lord, What a Parade! (by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette)

Lord, what a parade! The crowd quickly grew;
What noise they all made in welcoming you.
"Hosanna!" they shouted. "It's David's own son!
Hosanna! Come save us! God's reign has begun!"

They welcomed you in, a conquering king,
Yet what kind of reign would you really bring?
It wasn't a war horse you rode on that day;
A creature of peace carried you on your way.

Did those in that crowd expect something more
Than one who reached out in love to the poor?
Did they think a savior with armies was best,
Or did they remember: the peaceful are blessed?

Lord Jesus, it's true — we give you glad praise,
Yet living for you will challenge our ways.
So may we be open and welcome your reign.
Hosanna! Come save us! Renew us again!