

Two Processions in Jerusalem

Sermon by Christopher Epting at New Song Episcopal Church on March 25, 2018

Just a few brief remarks this morning on this Palm Sunday: The Liturgy on this day is so full and rich that I often think it's almost superfluous to try and add anything by way of commentary. The story of Jesus' so-called "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey gives way quickly to the Passion Gospel, the story of Jesus' arrest and trial and execution. This called the "Passion" because the Gospel writers all see this as being the result of Jesus' "passion," his suffering love, for God and for his people.

The Roman Catholic New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan and the late Marcus Borg (who was an Episcopalian) have invited us to consider **TWO** processions entering Jerusalem on that day. One was a **Peasant** procession, the other an **Imperial** procession. While Jesus and his followers were entering the city from the east Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, and his legions were entering the city from the west. Pilate's entry into Jerusalem and its significance would have been well known in the Jewish homeland of the first century.

It was standard operating procedure for the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for all the major Jewish festivals. This was not out of any respect for the religious devotion of their Jewish subjects. It was to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed in Fortress Antonia in case there was trouble. And there usually **was** trouble, especially on Passover which was a festival celebrating the liberation of the Jews from an earlier oppressor, the Egyptians. There would be trouble on this Passover as well!

By staging a "counter procession" to Pilate's, Jesus wanted to make a dramatic point. His purpose was to fulfill the prophecy made by Zechariah that the Messiah would come to Jerusalem in a very specific way – not like King David, in splendor on a white horse at the head of procession of armed men, but "humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). Moreover, the prophet Zechariah had predicted just what kind of a king he would be:

"He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command **peace** to the nations." **This** Messiah would not be a king of war...but a prince of peace.

What a contrast to that other procession! On one side of town, Pilate entering Jerusalem in a display of imperial power – cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets and weapons and banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, and the sound of marching feet –

implicitly claiming that the Romans were the rulers of the ancient world. Think of it as the first-century version of President Trump's military parade in Washington DC next November.

On the other side of town, Jesus and his rag-tag group of followers were trotting into town on foot and on a donkey with children and the poor. It may have looked more like The March For Our Lives in which some of us were blessed to participate yesterday. (Pause)

Well, dear friends, you and I have been given a choice in life by the events of Holy Week and Easter which we will be rehearsing this week. In short, we've been given a choice as to which procession we want to be in – the procession of the Empire (with all of its promises of wealth and power and success) or the procession of the poor (which calls us – no matter what our station in life -- to stand in solidarity with the last and the least, with those whom society has forgotten or wishes to forget – the poor and the oppressed, the old and the sick, those on the margins and those work for peace.) We get to decide which procession we want to be in.

When you and I were baptized and confirmed, our feet were placed on the path of that second procession, the procession of Jesus. Because we made a number of promises that day (or they were made on our behalf):

to trust in the God we've come to know as the Holy and Undivided Trinity;

to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer;

to fight against evil in our own lives and the world;

to proclaim Good News;

to love our neighbors as ourselves;

and to strive for justice and peace.

Those promises are not just some empty ritual.

They are a kind of pledge of allegiance... allegiance to the true Ruler of the ancient (and modern) world... and a statement of our intention to live our lives as part of that Kingdom.

Let us prepare ourselves carefully during this Holy Week before renewing our vows at Easter time.

Because they determine, in large measure, which procession we want to be in.

And perhaps...

where we will arrive...

at the end of our journey!