

10th April 2022 - Palm/Passion Sunday
Rev David Coster
Isaiah 50:4-9a & Luke 19:28-40
Lo your King comes to you!

Parades and National gathering are a very ancient way of gathering people to express national pride and even supremacy. Adolf Hitler did this time after time at Nuremburg prior to and during World War II. Donald Trump, in the USA, did something similar with his rallies where he fired up the faithful and received their adulation, massaging his ego. More recently, Vladimir Putin, in Russia, I understand, has forced state employees into attending his rally in support of his invasion of Ukraine. Parades displaying military power and might are nothing new!

We heard of one such parade this morning in our reading from Mark's Gospel.

On this the last Sunday prior to Easter it is common practise to read either or both the Palm Sunday Readings and the Passion Sunday Readings. We have focused, this morning, on the Palm Sunday readings – the last Sunday of Lent and our gateway into the trials and triumphs of Holy week.

This is a Sunday that we have often celebrated with children actively involved in the worship service for it is a Sunday that lends itself to that sort of involvement with children riding a donkey, palm branches waving and children and adults shouting Hosanna. It is a Sunday that lends itself to the singing of hymns such as "All glory, laud and honour to thee redeemer King," and "Ride on ride on in majesty."

It is a Sunday where Jesus finally is acknowledged by not only his disciples but by crowds of people as the redeemer King. Yet by the end of this week those same crowds were the ones calling for his crucifixion. Why? What caused them to change their minds?

Let me give you the background because the setting is vitally important to our making sense of the Palm Sunday procession.

According to the New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem was not a spontaneous event. Rather they see the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as a staged event – a parody of what was happening on the other side of the city of Jerusalem.

Let me explain their reasoning. Every year the Roman Governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal city residence in the West. You see, the Roman Governor did not like to reside in this most Jewish of cities with its inclement climate. He preferred down at Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast where the climate and way of life was much more conducive to his Roman ways. But the Roman Governor made sure that every Passover he set off and lead his Imperial Army with all pomp and ceremony into Jerusalem for the Passover – the most national of Jewish feast which celebrated an ancient victory over Egypt.

Celebration of an ancient victory was of no concern to Rome, but a modern day revolt was. So at the Passover, when the population of Jerusalem swelled from 50,000 to over 500,000 the Governor resided in Jerusalem to make sure the populace knew who really was in charge – and this was not God or the Jews – it was Rome.

Here is how Crossan and Borg describe the Roman Governor's entry through the West gate of the City of Jerusalem. "A visual panoply of imperial power: calvary on horses, foot

soldiers, leather armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.”

It is also important to remember that the Emperor of Rome was not viewed simply as the ruler of the Roman world, he was actually deemed to be a God or the Son of God – one to be worshipped and adored. The presence of the Roman Governor signalled not only military might but also a challenge to the Jewish belief that there was only one God in heaven and on earth.

As Governor Pilate clanged and crashed his Imperial way into Jerusalem through the West gate, Jesus approached through the East gate riding a donkey, followed by a colt and a rag tag band of poor country folk who lacked any political or military power. His was the procession of the ridiculous, the powerless and the vulnerable. Borg and Crossan comment, “What we often call the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem was actually an anti-imperial, anti-triumphal one, a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor entering a city on horseback through gates opened in abject submission.”

On the other hand, the procession which Jesus led was the most unthreatening, most unmilitary of all with Jesus on the back of a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting alongside her.

Jesus was drawing on the rich, prophetic symbolism of his Jewish history. The prophet Zechariah predicted the ride of a king “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.” Zech 9:9. He would be the non-violent king who would “command peace to the nations.”

As Luke records Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem he seems to follow the same form as is found in no less than twelve other triumphal entries in 1 and 2 Maccabees and also in Josephus (the great Jewish historian). In all of this Luke is rearranging the Jewish hopes of the Messiah who would come to ‘save’ them.

The Palm branches also were symbols. Palm branches were used to celebrate the Maccabean victory nearly two hundred years before the time of Jesus. The Jewish Maccabees miraculously militarily conquered their pagan enemies and restored Jerusalem once again into Jewish hands.

This same expectation almost certainly lay behind the crowds who welcomed Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. These were people who remembered the great victories of King David and King Solomon when Israel was at the peak of regional power.

I suspect that Jesus must have had a wonderful sense of humour. How otherwise could he have conceived of such a joking parody for the Palm Sunday events?

I suspect that sooner or later Pilate, the Roman Governor, learned of Jesus parody and would have had a good idea of its significance but he would not have felt threatened.

By riding in, in this manner Jesus raised the Messianic hopes of the Jewish people. At last, they would have thought, here is someone prepared to take a lead, take charge and drive the hated Romans out of God’s own country. Jesus was the one to kick butts and act like a real Messiah - Saviour of his people.

By Thursday night Jesus was meeting with his disciples in an olive grove talking about his body and blood. He was not up at the palace or temple leading a revolt and seizing power. People quickly became disillusioned and angry.

Events in Ukraine show us that some Political leaders still tend to think that military solutions and violence are what works when we want to get our own way or seek revenge. We still tend to think that military, political and economic power are what provide the solutions to what ails us.

Palm Sunday is a reminder to us that this is not so – this is not the way of God who works and lives by different values and calls to us to live by different values.

Luke's Gospel reveals that Jesus' nature and identity were portrayed in the names given to him. Jesus is most often called "Teacher," once by Peter, "the Messiah," also "Son of David," and "Son of Man"; demons called him "the Holy One of God." It is only on Palm Sunday that Jesus uses a new title for himself when he gives his disciples the instruction to go and get a colt. There he says, "If anyone asks you why you are doing this just say, "The Lord needs it...."

Lord, *kurios* in Greek is an ascription reserved for royalty and divinity. The meaning is clear (maybe not to us) the one entering Jerusalem on the back of a donkey is no mere teacher; his presence is far too powerful for a mere mortal. The centurion at the cross summed it up when he said, "Truly this man was God's son.

To God be the glory. Amen