



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REVEREND EARL GROUT, DEACON
SUNDAY OF THE PASSION, PALM SUNDAY, MARCH 25, 2018
ISAIAH 50:4-9A; PSALM 31; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11; MARK 11:1-11

TWO PROCESSIONS – CHOOSE ONE

Mark 11:1-11 [*When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,*

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.]

Two processions on opposite sides of Jerusalem. One procession is peasant; the other is imperial. One is a procession of the poor and dispossessed; the other is of the rich

and powerful. One proclaims the kingdom of God; the other the power of empire. Jesus, the son of God, leads the one; and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, leads the other.

Pilate and the Roman occupation chose the cooler coastal city of Caesarea Maritima for their headquarters over the provincial environment of Jerusalem, hotter in climate and temperament. As a province, Palestine seethed with discontent and rebellion, and was especially restive—in fact, white-hot—during Passover, especially its capitol, Jerusalem. So Pilate would scrape up any troops he could spare, and head to Jerusalem to reinforce the garrison there in Fortress Antonia.

Even with every available soldier, they were outnumbered. So their entrance had to be impressive. You can imagine: cavalry on war horses, infantry, weapons and full armor, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold, and the sounds of marching feet, creaking leather, jingling equipment, beating drums—all amid swirling dust. It was meant to intimidate—to instill fear by troops who were themselves afraid.

On the other side of the city, Jesus's procession is almost a parody of

Pilate's. Jesus arrives on a donkey instead of a cavalry horse. In place of banners and golden eagles, there are palm branches and coats spread on the ground. Instead of pounding drums, there are people shouting "Hosanna in the highest heaven." Parody it may be, but it is the parody of a rival—a rival kingdom, a rival view of reality and a way of life.

The contrast and conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar are central to the Gospel of Mark and Christian life. Caesar's kingdom is "the world," as we heard in last Sunday's Gospel. It's the "system," in the ancient agrarian world of Jesus's time, the "domination system." It was where overwhelming debt leveraged peasants off their land, and the over half the production went into the coffers of a small wealthy elite. This vast inequality, of course, was enforced by the occupying forces of the Romans and legitimated by religion. It's all the will of God.

The humble savior, entering on a donkey, represented a different view of

God's will—the way of justice and peace. Jesus brings the restoration of Israel, the hope of all humanity, as envisioned and demanded by the prophets. “Tell the daughter of Zion, look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey” (Zech. 9.9). He will enact justice and command peace as only justice can come from peace, not peace of mind, but the peace of reconciliation. Jesus brings the kingdom of God, the way of the beatitudes: blessed are the poor . . . blessed are the humble . . . the merciful . . . the peacemakers.

Well, the world or, “the Powers that Be” – as scholar Walter Wink calls the system, are still with us in force. As we heard in last Sunday's Gospel in John, if you love your life in the system, you will lose it; if you hate that life, you will save it for eternity. It all depends on which procession you join. You can walk in the procession of peace and justice or the procession of power and privilege.

The issues are still power versus people, but are particular to one's own time and place. Today, we consider:

- **Income inequality:** in 2016, 50% of all income went to 20% of the population with the top 8% pulling in 28.5%. On the other side, is the word of the God, “who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing” (Lev. 19.18).
- **#Metoo:** psychologist Dacher Keltner has found that without moral grounding, the rich and powerful tend to indulge impulses and justify selfishness, even to point of disregarding other people's humanity. On the other side, love your neighbor as yourself and “love one another as I have loved you.” Keltner also reports that good people with power tend to be kinder.
- **Immigration:** fear and tribalism, walls, or on the other side, the law: “. . . you shall not

oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 19.33—34).

- **Violence:** Guns before kids. Or on the other side, kids before guns. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they are teenagers.

So we have two processions yet today. Do we follow Jesus on his donkey on the way to the cross? Yes, he is still

here—inviting us to walk with him. Or do we follow Caesar---there are always Caesars—on the way to the five-star fortress?

“He called to crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it’” (Mark 8.34—35).

Choose. But choose wisely, not comfortably. Amen.



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