

Sermon Palm Sunday Year B (All Saints'); Gospel Mark 14:1-15:15

Jesus' "Grand Entrance" and Kingship: A New Perspective

We have reached a climactic moment in Mark's story of Jesus' life. Today Palm Sunday is the day the followers of Jesus have been waiting for. Put yourself in the shoes of those disciples who have been with Jesus throughout Galilee, walking with him, eating with him, watching him heal and feed and preach about this new Kingdom he tells about in his parables, waiting to see him overcome the oppression and the suffering of his people at the hands of the powerful empire that brutally rules over them. The moment has arrived. Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem, to proclaim his new rule, to finally once and for all make things right. But those followers don't really understand what this Kingdom will look like. Despite what Jesus has already told them three times—that he will be tortured and killed and then resurrected—they are still in the dark. They think they will be part of a new even more powerful reign, more powerful even than the Roman Empire, and they imagine—as had James and John—sitting on the right and left sides of Jesus on the throne of this powerful new empire. Yes, the day has finally come.

Of course only Jesus knows what this new kingdom is all about. It is not a kingdom at all like the kingdom of the world they knew. It is unlike anything his followers could ever imagine. And his entrance into Jerusalem on this week of the Passover will be unlike any grand procession they had ever seen. He has another kind of entrance in mind. This procession we just celebrated as we entered with our palm branches today is Jesus' well planned demonstration against the powers that rule the world. Political? Absolutely! In the eyes of the Romans Jesus here is an insurgent, a rebel, a leader of an insurrection.

Some scholars have speculated that there were actually two parades in Jerusalem that day. Imagine this scene: The governor of Judea, Pilate, enters Jerusalem through the largest gate, the Western gate, riding on a war horse with calvary, soldiers, banners and troops marching behind. A grand display of

military power! The streets were cleared and large crowds gathered to watch. And none of the pilgrims who had gathered could miss the point Pilate was making: that their celebration of the Passover was only happening at the tolerant oversight of the Roman government.

On the other side of town another more rag-tag procession had begun: the procession of Jesus through the smaller East gate. And what did it look like? Was Jesus too decked out in armor, troops on horseback with swords and shields marching behind, a military display of imperial might? Perhaps that is what his followers might have wanted. But of course it was not. Jesus had carefully planned his own procession. He had sent two of his followers to find a donkey to ride on. He begins his “final campaign” at the Mount of Olives, the traditional location from which the people expected the final battle for Jerusalem’s liberation to begin. And what provisions does Jesus bring for this “battle?” No weapons for war, simply a colt, not even a full grown donkey! This is a well-planned carnival-like procession. I can just see Jesus’ dirty sandal-covered feet dragging in the dirt as almost comically he rides this undersized colt, his dust-covered followers in tow, people throwing their cloaks and branches on the ground before him. “Hosanna!” The people cry, “Save us please!” “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” Sort of like “Long live the King!,” a treasonous proclamation in the eyes of the Romans. This theatrical parade is led by a vulnerable defenseless non-violent man on a donkey, being received as a king by the people watching. It turns the imperial notion of power and rule on its head. This “triumphal entrance” is a lampoon of the “powers that be” and their pretensions to glory and dominion. Jesus comes not with pomp and wealth, but as one identified with the poor; not as a mighty warrior, but as one who is vulnerable and refuses to rely on violence, who humbly rejects domination. What Jesus is trying to show is an alternative to the way of domination by the ruling empire, a radically new and different kind of political and religious authority and power. Jesus here is enacting in a seemingly

humorous and disorienting way a totally different understanding of “rule” and “power,” and in so doing invites people to see and live in a world in a new way, “God’s Way,” to resist the way of the world. This dramatic procession—this protest—is a revelation of what the Kingdom he has been talking about for so long is all about. It reflects how he sees the world, a world with a new kind of kingship. I am not the kind of king you were expecting! Jesus is showing, I am one who will wash the feet of the ones I serve. What a way to send his message!

So Jesus has entered Jerusalem today. The entrance itself is a message, although a confusing one for his followers, and at this point in the story I don’t think many get it. They won’t until later this week and the days that follow. We know the end of the story, but those in Jerusalem that day, all except Jesus himself, did not. The lectionary for today—the reading of the passion, the completion of which we won’t in our church read until Good Friday—jumps ahead to the events that occur later in this Holy Week. We don’t know much about what happens on the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of this week, but we know what happens during the Triduum, the three days beginning on Maundy Thursday, and on Easter Sunday.

One thing that runs through the Passion narrative we just read, a kind of thread that links the numerous events that happen to Jesus, is this idea of kingship. Pilate asks Jesus “Are you the king of the Jews?” In John’s gospel Jesus responds “My kingdom is not from this world.” Pilate asks the crowd “Do you want me to release for you ‘the King of the Jews?’” The crowd shouts back “Crucify him!” The soldiers mock him, clothe him in a purple cloak, twist thorns into a crown for his head, and salute him saying “Hail, King of the Jews!” And as we will read Friday the inscription above him on the cross read “The King of the Jews.” No, Jesus was no king for them. Caesar, the empire, the way of the world was their king.

Yes, just as the two parades in Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday are reflections of two dramatically different kingdoms, so there are two kingdoms in

our world today. There is the kingdom of empire, and there is the Kingdom of God, the one Jesus embodied and suffered and died for—a world of non-violence, of healing and wholeness, of peace, of love. A kingdom where outsiders are welcomed, where rejected children are given preference, the hungry fed, the most vulnerable given priority—God’s way. Why is it that the world rejects it? And why is there such a cost to pay for helping to build this kind of world? Can we pay the cost? I want a non-violent world, but can I make myself vulnerable enough to live in it? I want to share, but don’t my own needs and comforts come first? I want to be neighborly, but how much time will I spend taking care of the strangers I meet? And there is my fear of scarcity, that without my possessions I will not have enough. It is that fear that leads to our consumer mentality, and ultimately to the abuse and destruction of our very home Earth. That, my friends, is no way to live. It is the very fear that Jesus tries to free us from. How do I fully live into that calling of Jesus to live free from fear, to trust, to welcome, to love my neighbor? I know that the joy of living in such a kingdom is worth the cost, but will I actually live that way? I want and pray for God’s kingdom here on earth, but at what cost to me? God help me, help us. Transform us into what we already are, your very body already in us.

I had a conversation with Jim a few weeks ago, and he made the comment that Jesus is not promising a utopia. Jesus surely knows that humanity will not, cannot now totally escape the grasp of the powerful forces at work to prevent the very things that he embodies—love of neighbor, justice, peace, freedom and liberation from fear. But what he asks of us as followers is to do our best to keep those things alive amidst the very powers that reject them. We don’t have to move mountains, but we can participate in little ways. Every action is significant. Every action—things you do here like feeding the hungry, inclusivity and welcoming the stranger, helping to educate children who would otherwise have no books to read, advocating for those on the margins, seeking justice by speaking up to our government officials...the list goes on—

every action helps to keep the Kingdom he talks about alive, even and especially in the face of the forces that oppose us. There are still two kingdoms, but we have hope and we have trust that only yours gives life, sustains life.

So, back to the story. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, but the ending is yet to come. A hint: bad things will happen to Jesus this week, but there is good news. Stay present this week as we walk with him through this time of trial.