

Palm/Passion Sunday, March 16, 2008  
Matthew 21: 1-11ff  
Who Is This? (and what difference does it make?)

A little boy was sick on Palm Sunday and stayed home from church with his mother. His father returned from church holding a palm branch. The little boy was curious and asked, "Why do you have that palm branch, dad?" "You see, when Jesus came into town, everyone waved Palm Branches to honor him, so we got Palm Branches today." The little boy replied, "Aw Shucks! The one Sunday I miss is the Sunday that Jesus shows up!"

Let us pray: God, be with us today as we are present to your word. Show us who you are. As we honor you with our palm branches, may we not miss you when you show up, calling us to deeper discipleship.

Parades: Everyone loves a parade – Just a few years ago, I experienced my first live Macy's Thanksgiving parade. This weekend, people are searching out the various St. Patrick's Day parades. Growing up, there were the memorial day and fourth of July parades in my village and somehow everyone in my family was marching. They were of the formal type. Everyone had their place and was to practice their marching steps and routines.

One of the delightful parades for me was my first experience of a small town parade in a little town in Maine where kids decorated their bikes and brought noisemakers and everyone was exuberant with joy – not worrying about being in step.

That's the feeling I think Palm Sunday Had. Hundreds had been on a pilgrimage to reach Jerusalem for the Passover celebration and now the city was in sight. On the way, Jesus had been attracting a crowd. Now he was asking for a colt to ride into the city. It triggered the spontaneity of the crowd. The parade was on! Sparked by Jesus' actions. Sparked by the deepest yearnings of the people. Sparked by the profound gratitude of those who had been healed. Memories of scripture came to mind. The ninth chapter of Zechariah and the recitation of Psalm 118 – these actions of Jesus were the symbols of victory. It was more like street theater than a parade. It wasn't a procession for glorification but rather a symbolic call to a new way of living – an alternate vision to that of the powers that dominated.

Coming from the east, up the Jordan valley from Jericho, using the original route their ancestors had taken into the promised land centuries ago, there came a crowd of Jews, traveling into Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. Their leader, a well-known healer and teacher, was traveling on a donkey. For didn't the scriptures say, "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! "? The crowds accompanying him shouted "Hosanna!" which means "Save us! Save us! They cut branches from trees and waved them in celebration! He rode humbly as the Prince of Peace ready to usher in a new kingdom – the kingdom of God. The kingdom built on love and compassion – the wholeness of shalom – a peace that is more than absence of war – a peace with foundations of justice.

“Here comes the king, the King! Riding on a donkey and a colt and very one knows who he is They throw down their cloaks and wave their branches and the King rides into town. Of course, they will be surprised to discover that their expectations about who this king is will be shaken. This is not King David slewing Goliath and they hoped. At least not with the instruments of war. No his victory would be different.

However, there was another parade that same day. The other parade was on the other side of town. The Roman Legion, led by Pontius Pilate, marched into the city from the west in a great display of military power. They stepped in sync, raised their weapons high. Make no mistake. They were prepared for war, ready to quell any uprising or threat to Roman rule. The Jews may re-enact their freedom from their captors in Egypt, but they would not entertain any wild notions about rebelling from Rome!

Today we have to search history for account of the Roman procession, but those who marched with Jesus were acutely aware of that other parade. The two processions would intersect at the Temple. There, Pilate would watch for trouble from those Jews! As our scripture points out, the whole city was in turmoil!

Many were asking, "Who is this?" And some of the crowds were answering, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Was he the one? They couldn't escape the unspoken message in this parade, especially at this special Passover time --- behold, your king comes to you!

"Who is this?" the whole city asked. The answer to that question would make all the difference in the events to follow, and to the whole world thereafter.

Unknown to the crowd or even to the disciples, Jesus had only five more days to live. While the city pondered who he was, Jesus acted. In the next few days, his actions would lead to fear, betrayal, and desertion, not only by the crowds, but by his closest friends, the disciples.

The two parades met at the temple. Two kingdoms, head to head. On the one hand, the powerful Roman empire. On the other, the one who declared the kingdom of God.

Watch Jesus enter the temple --- hear his words. "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers! The tables are overturned; the merchants flee. And then this teacher is healing the blind and lame, and the children are taking up the cry again --- "Hosanna to the Son of David!" The priests were angry - and fearful. They owed their allegiance to Rome - only by the good will of their occupiers could the temple system survive. Yet, they could not act while the crowd was singing praises. So Jesus left the temple safely and spent the night outside the city in Bethany.

The next day he returned, like a man possessed. He cursed a fig tree, and it withered. Then he went again to the temple to teach. The priests tried to catch him up, to break his authority. But every answer he gave confounded them.

He dared to tell dangerous parables ---how the son of the owner of a vineyard was murdered by wicked tenants, how a king seated beggars at his banquet. All of them pointed criticisms of the powerful.

And when they asked him directly about his loyalty to Rome ---"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" he wiggled free, with a riddle ---"Give to the emperor things that belong to him, and give to God what belongs to

God!

Thus it went all week. He befuddled the wisest Pharisees. In fact, he said that the greatest in the kingdom would be servants, and shouted a litany of complaints at them, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees - Hypocrites! Lastly, he even predicted the fall of the temple itself! Who is this, anyway? Who does he think he is?"

Roman legions were watching, ready to strike. It was time to choose sides. Two kingdoms claimed power. Caesar or Jesus?

The collision of the two parades: The dissonance of the music by which they marched. That's the way I feel today. Here we are entering Holy Week and re-enacting the drama of two different visions of how to secure peace in the land. In the midst of this ancient drama, we have the current realities. Wednesday, this week, marks the fifth anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq. It is like those two ancient parades meeting at the temple, searching for the truth. Both claiming this is the way of Jesus. The rattling of sabers and candles lifted for peace.

Who is this? How we answer that question makes all the difference - of whether we live in trust or suspicion, in courage or fear, in despondency or hope. Because in this crucial question lies the answer to the life question: "In whom we can place our trust?" In the power of governments and armies, in our own strength of character, or in one who can save us?

The parade comes again to challenge us. Can we courageously walk with Jesus into the halls of power and call for peace. Can we join Jesus as he stands with those who hunger for justice, stand shoulder to shoulder with those who thirst to be known and loved and recognize the sacredness on human life no matter what side we're on.