

PALM SUNDAY THE OVERTURE
The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday
April 9, 2017

If the Passion is a great drama of suffering and triumph, then Palm Sunday is an eloquent and powerful introduction of its main themes. There is a triumphant note to Palm Sunday, especially as we in the church have come to celebrate it. It is a stirring overture to the drama of the Passion. We could see it as a high moment before the depths of his trial and execution, like the way in storytelling that the pain of a great fall is made greater if we see the hero in a moment of great happiness just before it happens.

The writer of Matthew wanted to underline the point that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a fulfillment of the prophecies in Jewish scripture. His engineering his own entrance by asking for a donkey to ride is a reference to the coming of God's saving warrior in the ninth chapter of Zechariah. ("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. ...he shall command peace to the nations." (Zech. 9:9, 10) The use of palms to wave and strew in his path is a Jewish practice derived from the fact that the Jews used palm branches in rededicating the temple after the Maccabean revolt in about 168 BCE.

The point of all this is that the writer of Matthew greatly valued the idea that Jesus was fulfilling scriptural prophecy—he believed that this was how it would be when someone was sent by God. So he has a grand entrance into Jerusalem, a grand

entrance that is undercut. His is a parody of the Roman victory procession that we still enjoy the spectacles in movies and TV shows twenty centuries later.

For us, as for Jesus' followers, things will not be what they seem, or what we wish them to be. For Palm Sunday mingles triumph and humility, victory and humiliation. Your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.... But is it humility or humiliation? We in the church, like people generally, tend to shy away from humility. After all, once you've arrived at humility, humiliation is right there waiting—or so it seems to our timid and fearful hearts.

We go from palms to ashes, from success to failure, from life to death. We don't need to know how to do that; it just happens. Palms to ashes. All fall down. But God wants more from us than what comes naturally. How do we go from humility to victory, like the humble warrior savior in Zechariah, for whom humiliation is not even a possibility? To say it in twenty-first century jargon, Jesus is doing his version of a triumphal ride into Jerusalem in order to interface with empire. His humble path to victory is from donkey to trial dock to cross to tomb. It is his destiny, his purpose, his ministry. The outrageous message of Holy Week is that we are called to follow him, in whatever ways we can muster.

In our reading from Philippians this morning Paul talks about Jesus being “in the form of God.” Paul says Jesus didn't want to exploit his equality with God, so he “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” Early followers like Paul had to explain to themselves and others this seeming contradiction,

this radical disconnect between Jesus the victoriously powerful and Jesus the humble, unassuming victim. We try to explain it to ourselves, but it makes us uneasy, much of the time, and we look away, or turn quickly to Jesus the Triumphant, Christus Victor. We tend to like the resurrection without the crucifixion.

Still, in our best moments, we do what we can, as often as we can, to perform our version of what for centuries has been called the imitation of Christ. The drama of these eight days is to be inspired—that overused word that means to bring the breath of a spirit inside us—to *inspirit* us, maybe, to be more like Jesus of Nazareth than we knew how to be. We might have the courage, or the foolishness, to step away from the mastery of our comfort zones to do what we can to heal the world. That’s what it means to be saved.

This morning the play, the great action of salvation, has begun again. You know, we all compose the stories of our lives. Or, if we’re lazy or inattentive, we let those around us make up our stories for us, which may or may not be accurate or flattering. Our challenge, as Christians, is to make Jesus’ story part of our own, to make him live in us. This morning the play, the great action of salvation, has begun again, in all our hearts and lives.

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