

Palm Sunday C
Luke 19:28-40
April 10, 2022

“A Tale of Two Triumphs”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

When [Jesus] had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this: ‘The Lord needs it.’’ So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

*‘Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!’*

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’

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“Blessed be the king who comes in the name of Lord!” the crowds shouted. “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” C’mon, wave those palm branches folks! This was a joyful procession; a hopeful procession. Do you feel hopeful this morning? The crowd certainly felt hopeful that Palm Sunday so long ago. “Surely,” they must have thought, “this is the one we’ve been waiting for.” In fact, their hope must have been difficult to contain. After all, Jesus tells some of the teachers who called for restraint that if he tried to quiet the crowds, even the stones would shout out! Hope was in the air. But hope is a dangerous thing. Hope empowers people to believe that things can be different—should be different. Hope inspires conviction and conviction inspires action and action can lead to conflict. The teachers knew this.

The teachers knew that in another part of Jerusalem, at very nearly the same time, a second triumphal entry was taking place—one accompanied by all the trappings of an empire. A Roman triumphal entry, simply called “a triumph,” celebrated the arrival of a commander who had won a great military victory. It was part parade and pageantry and part religious rite in which the honored victor led the procession to the temple of Jupiter, the god of war. And it was all celebration of the power of empire over any who would stand in its way. Captured enemies and spoils of war would have been on display and the celebrated commander would have ridden a chariot flanked by an honor guard while he was showered with flowers and palm fronds were waved to signify peace.

The teachers knew that in another part of Jerusalem, at very nearly the same time as Jesus’, a second triumphal entry was taking place—that of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate’s entry would have been grand, but it would also have been steeped in irony. As the people prepared to celebrate the Passover—the celebration of the Hebrew’s freedom from slavery in Egypt—Pilate’s entry would have communicated to those gathered in Jerusalem very clearly: “Don’t get any ideas. You can celebrate your Passover and deliverance from Egypt, but you belong to Rome now.”

The teachers knew that Jesus was riding into Jerusalem through a back gate on a donkey, escorted by poor and ordinary folk laying their coats in the road. And the teachers also knew that at nearly the same time, Pilate was riding into Jerusalem through a front gate in a chariot or on a war horse, escorted by armed guards. Their call for quiet doesn't seem quite so cantankerous given the circumstances, does it?

Jesus and Pilate, a donkey and a chariot, a military procession and a peasants' parade, the way of self-giving and peace and the way of acquisition and conquest—these two triumphs really do symbolize polar opposite ways of being in the world: war and peace. And, like the rest of the accounts in the gospels, Jesus is ALWAYS portrayed as antithetical to Caesar. Jesus' message of heaven's realm of peace through justice is always portrayed as diametrically opposed to Rome's message of peace through victory. The world's way of violence, oppression, injustice, and war is not heaven's way of collaboration, liberation, justice, and peace. This story, and the historical details lurking just beneath its surface, make the contradiction clear.

Make no mistake, though, both of these triumphs are about power, however. On the one hand, Pilate's entry puts on public display all the power of the Roman legions, the power of military might and radical defeat, the power of money, the power of the elite, and the power of Caesar. On the other hand, Jesus' entry displays the power of humility, the power of service, the power of belief, the power of love, the power of peace.

As news of the horrors in Ukraine, the human rights violations in Afghanistan, the scruples of wealthy and elite leaders around the world, and corruption for the sake of the almighty dollar flood our TV screens, populate our news feeds and social media accounts, and flood our email inboxes daily, we see evidence that the power Jesus protested is still a malevolent force to be reckoned with in our world today. But that is not the only kind of power. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on that

long-ago Palm Sunday bore witness to another kind of power and as Jesus' followers today, ours is the call to do the same.

Mahatma Gandhi once said that, "The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace." Nearly 2,000 years earlier, Jesus' proclaimed the same message through his life, teaching, ministry, triumphal entry, and criminal's death. "The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace."

On that Palm Sunday, long ago, two triumphs took place: Jesus entered the city through a back gate on the back of a donkey, walking over the coats of a conquered, but hopeful people. Pilate entered the city through a front gate on a chariot and with a military escort as a victor. The teachers tried to quiet Jesus. What about us? Which will we choose?

Will you pray with me:

*Lord, make us instruments of your peace;
where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon:
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope
where there is darkness, light
where there is sadness, joy
Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled
as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying we awaken to Eternal Life.¹*

Amen.

¹ Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi