

From the Four Winds to the Seven Seas

Matthew 21.1-11

Palm Sunday

April 17, 2011

"Shout and cheer, Daughter Zion! Raise the roof, daughter Jerusalem! Your king is coming! a good king who makes all things right, a humble king riding a donkey, a mere colt of a donkey. I've had it with war—no more chariots in Ephraim, no more war horses in Jerusalem, no more swords and spears, bows and arrows. He will offer peace to the nations, a peaceful rule worldwide, from the four winds to the seven seas.

- Zechariah 9.9-10 (The Message)

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

"Hosanna... Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!" the crowds shouted as Jesus passed by. These strains could be heard wafting through the streets of Jerusalem on that day so long ago. Strangely enough, however, they are not heard in a great many churches in our day. There has been a trend in modern Christianity to let the observance of "Passion Sunday" eclipse the celebration of "Palm Sunday." What's the difference, you ask? In a nutshell, Passion Sunday foregoes the triumphal, celebratory mood of Palm Sunday to focus on the passion – the suffering – of Jesus. I would add my voice to those who suggest that we do so at

*James R. "Bo" Crowe
Overland Park Christian Church*

our own peril. We run the risk of missing the glimpse of victory that Palm Sunday offers, and of misunderstanding the message and motives of Jesus in entering Jerusalem.

We need Palm Sunday; we need the courage and hope it engenders by looking forward ever so briefly to the victory of Love. Holy Week is difficult. There is plenty of darkness, deception, innocent suffering, and death to contemplate during this week in which questions of life at their deepest level are raised. There is plenty of time for the clouds to gather, so I suggest we begin this week with celebration ...with a glimpse of how things will be when Love and Peace have become the measure of all things.

We also need Palm Sunday because of the light it casts on the message and motives of Jesus. Everything that unrolled in the following days did so in consequence of the stance he took that fateful day. Why did Jesus go to Jerusalem in the first place? He had spent his entire ministry – at least in the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) - teaching and healing in Galilee among the so-called lower classes of Jews; peasants, artisans, and the like. Yet Jesus made that one fateful trip to Jerusalem. Some scholars would say that it was Jesus' passion for justice and equality that led to his passion and suffering in Jerusalem. That is to say, his passion led him to Jerusalem to protest the oppression of Rome, and the Jewish Elite who not only tolerated it, but profited from it.

Read the gospels and you will see that Jesus' passion had nothing to do with personal recognition and success. He put no stock in titles and honors; and his teaching, preaching, and healing focused not on him, but on God. Jesus had a passion for the kingdom of God that is itself an empire ...an empire that bears no resemblance to that of Rome, or any other for that matter.

Read closely and you will notice that Jesus didn't announce a kingdom that would come at some point in the future. He announced a kingdom he saw materializing in the midst of the people; taking shape and gaining momentum in his life, teaching, and interaction with them. It was impossible for these two kingdoms – the kingdom of God and Rome – to avoid a head-on collision. And so Jesus went to Jerusalem to underscore the stark differences between these empires, and to offer people a choice between them.

What are those differences? Believe it or not, they are not immediately visible. Jesus speaks of peace, but Rome offered its own peace, the Pax Romana (peace of Rome). Jesus speaks of God's salvation, bringing wellbeing to the people but, again, Rome saw itself as gracious, offering salvation to the entire world through God's son, the Emperor. At a deeper level, however, the differences couldn't be more visible. At some point the question must arise, *how* will God – or Rome – establish peace? *How* will wellbeing be revealed in the life of the people? How will salvation become real and victory won?

We must leave Rome aside for the moment, because there was no agreement among Jews in Jesus' day about *how* God would bring about salvation and peace. There are two clear yet clearly distinct perspectives in the Old Testament. The first professes that God will bring about salvation by destroying the enemies of God, that all of the nations will be brought to Jerusalem bound and humbled into submission before the restored glory of Israel; a chosen people exalted on God's holy mountain.

The second perspective, clearly distinct from the first, professes that God will bring about salvation by reconciling the peoples of the earth ...by peaceful means. No violence or destruction; no war horses and chariots; no exaltation or humiliation. God will call and the peoples will stream to God's holy mountain to find healing and peace. They will be led into a time of freedom and prosperity by a peaceful king, a humble king, a gracious king.

Two perspectives of salvation and God's kingdom are offered in the Old Testament. Either God will bring about salvation by destroying God's enemies and throwing them at the feet of the chosen – a vision eerily close to that of Rome - or by reconciling the peoples one to another, allowing them to recognize the bonds of unity that tie them together and unite them in the light of God's Kingdom ...a Kingdom of justice, equality, goodness, and sharing.

To which should we offer our allegiance, you and I; the vision of salvation by violence, or salvation and peace by non-violent means? We must choose, you know, and we must choose before this week gets too far along. Perhaps Jesus' approach to Jerusalem through the events of Palm Sunday can help us decide. Jesus was not indecisive; he showed no tendency to waver between the choice of violent empire or peaceful kingdom. He chose to enter Jerusalem as an enactment of the vision in Zechariah 9:9; not as a warrior king coming on a steed with armies

marching behind to throw their enemies at the feet of God's people, but as a king of peace who would usher in a reign of peace for all peoples. This King rides humbly on a donkey, and proclaims that there will be no more war horses, no more swords and shields, in Jerusalem. Rather, there will be peace for God's people.

This is the vision Jesus chose; this is the way – the path – he chose, even though it brought him into direct conflict with Rome, and the leaders of his own faith. The contrast between an empire of violence and a kingdom of peace is starkly clear in the comparison of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey, surrounded by a band of peasants and misfits; and the Roman Governor who approached Jerusalem at the same time mounted on a war steed and supported by cavalry, line upon line of infantry, and all the pomp and circumstance that could be mustered to make clear the intimidating power of Rome.

Jesus rejected this vision of peace through violence and intimidation, and through his actions asserted that there is only one kingdom that will prevail, one empire that will truly bring peace and justice; and that is the Kingdom of God; a kingdom without violence or bloodshed that will be proclaimed among the peoples from the four winds to the seven seas.

So as we enter this holiest of weeks, let us not forget the vision Jesus has placed before us. When the clouds start closing in, when the darkness threatens to swallow us up, when Jesus is betrayed, arrested, tortured, and executed; make no mistake, he knew the path he had chosen. The vision of this week is Light that shines through the darkness, Love that prevails through suffering and death, and Peace ushered in through humility and sacrifice. If we can summon the courage to stay the course, to walk with Jesus into the darkness, to be transformed ourselves during this week, then we will behold God's vision of victory outside that empty garden tomb on the dawn of the third day. Then, and only then, will we hear the angels proclaim, "He is not here; he is risen!"