

Palm Sunday, 2010**Every Stone Shall Cry****Luke 19:28-40**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Richard Israel, Associate Rector, at St. Paul's Church on March 28, 2010.

Palm Sunday in the church in which I grew up was always a day of celebration, the day reserved annually for Confirmation. We waved palms and sang festive songs of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, including the one with which we children could identify,

"Hosanna, loud hosanna, the little children sang;
Thro pillared court and Temple the lovely anthem rang.
To Jesus who had blessed them, close folded to His breast,
The children sang their praises, the simplest and the best."

Palm Sunday was a day of triumph and hope without thought of the shadows that would soon dominate that fateful week which we set apart as "Holy", at least not for me as a child. As I recall, the only puzzling aspect of Palm Sunday to my innocent mind was how Jesus knew where there would be a colt that had never been ridden and why he would tell his disciples to take it without asking permission. It seemed magical and, I suppose, subversive.

Decades later, after the church decided to read the Passion narrative on Palm Sunday since many of its members could not be counted on to attend the services of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, I'm afraid we have lost sight of the meaning of Jesus' Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem. Today it is on that parade into Jerusalem that I invite you to reflect.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write in *The Last Week*, "Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor., entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. ...it was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals. They did so not out of empathetic reverence for the religious devotion of their Jewish subjects, but to be in the city in case there was trouble. There often was, especially at Passover, a festival that celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire."

Understanding the context, we see that there was nothing romantic or naive about Jesus' triumphal entry into the clogged streets of Jerusalem. In fact, it might be better characterized as a highly symbolic and provocative act of street theater that dramatized his mission. He didn't ride a donkey because he was too tired to walk or because he wanted a better view of the onlookers. He deliberately chose this means of entry to embody the ancient words of the prophet Zechariah, "Look, your king is coming to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Unlike the Roman Empire that used a show of force to keep the peace and maintain the privilege of the powerful, the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus' "counter-procession" is characterized by peace through justice for even the least among us. Thinking about the scene you can almost imagine how it would be depicted by cable news today as "class warfare". As we know, for many who shouted "Hosanna", literally, "save us", it was just that. Like us, it was hard for them to follow a "savior" who identifies not only with the innocent victims of the world, in whose company we all like to number ourselves, but also with their "torturers". As Jesus enters Jerusalem in peace—in fulfillment of the Christmas prophecies sung by the angels to the shepherds and in pre-meditated contrast to the Roman governor, we who carry our palms are invited to "have this same mind" as Christ.

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd, fearing the reaction of the Roman forces to an act of political defiance, asked Jesus to tell his disciples to stop. But the truth must be told about Jesus. If his disciples are stifled, the stones beneath their feet will cry out the good news. And here at this juncture is where the story of two processions long ago impacts our lives. Will we be among those who praise Jesus or those who seek to silence the praise? Will we be among those who want to maintain the status quo that passes for peace at the expense of those who live on the margins, or will we cast our lot with the Prince of Peace who identifies with the vulnerable by walking the way of self-emptying love in a world that is always suspicious of such people?

The road to Jerusalem is not much different today than it was 2000 years ago. We are still surrounded by situations that beg for solutions but as a people we lack the conviction that all of us in this world belong to one another. The earth turns warmer and more vulnerable by the day. Racism, sexism and homophobia destroy families and poison relationships. The powerful pay fewer taxes. The national infrastructure decays. Fundamentalist groups and governments across the globe seek to suppress opposition, to deny questions, to resist change. Our political dialogue has been shouted down by stridency from both the right and the left. We are still on the road to Jerusalem, aren't we?

Into this mix of struggle and tension-- of cultural divides, global uncertainties and dogmatic certainties-- comes Jesus. He weeps over our failures to live justly, entrusting ourselves and our security to God, just as he wept over Jerusalem then. He comes to us who are not quite sure what to do with the palms that we hold today and bids us spread them on his path as a symbol of our willingness to make Christ's way of selfless love the path we will walk in our lives. He comes to us despite our hesitancy to surrender ourselves to this dangerous, subversive way of living and invites us once more to abandon the path that has been found wanting, that says the only way to security is by might and fear. He bids us seek the peace that passes all human understanding, the peace that excludes no one, the peace to which the stones beneath our feet will bear witness if we do not.

From palm branches to Passover to passion to peace, we celebrate it all at our table today. We come to this table, despite our unworthiness, because we, like the disciples on the road, recognize our hunger for Jesus. We come at his invitation to share once more a meal with Jesus and one another. We come to this table remembering the passion of Jesus, his physical passion by which his passion for peace was accomplished. We come to this table today to find strength to face the question: who will cry out this time? May we find the courage, the passion, and the peace to be those disciples who understand and cry out the good news of Jesus Christ with words of praise and acts of love.

