

Palm Sunday

Triumph to Cross

The Sunday beginning Holy Week was traditionally observed as Palm Sunday. It focused on the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Several decades ago, it became a sort of blended Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday.

For Passion Sunday, the processional gospel is the beginning of the service and then the entire Passion story would be read, often in place of a sermon. Now it's sort of a mix – some churches do the Palm/Passion combo and others do just Palm Sunday. The Narrative lectionary kind of does its own thing but always offers the option of the triumphal entrance as well as another reading.

So let's situate ourselves in the story.

We began Lent with the story of the raising of Lazarus. That is the event that set things in motion for the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus.

The triumphal entry is the event right after the raising of Lazarus, so we've backtracked to match the liturgical calendar.

But what we will read next is the culmination of the last 6 weeks. We've already read the passion story up to Jesus' crucifixion over the Sundays in Lent.

We remember Jesus' last meal with his disciples...when he washed their feet and instructed them to love as he loved. We remember Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial... Jesus' arrest...his interrogation by Annas and Caiaphas. Then he's tried by Pontius Pilate. Pilate can actually find no charge against Jesus.

But the priests backed him into a corner...they called his loyalty to the emperor into question and threatened his position in the Empire. So Pilate condemns Jesus mainly to hang on to his own power.

The priests get what they want...to hang on to their power.

So we come to today's reading.

John 19:16b-22

In my sermon last week, I said I was struggling with the whole king title for Jesus. I asked, what good is a king? We humans simply don't handle kings well...in fact we don't handle power well.

When we say Christ is king, we too often want to make him into the exact same kind of king Caesar was. A king who can crush our enemies and bring us to dominance.

So essentially, I said maybe we should ditch the king title. In his trial, Jesus never really did quite admit to being king of the Jews, even if that was the reason for his execution.

On the other hand, here he is, entering Jerusalem in a procession that would have been clearly recognized as one for a king.

Pilate would have also entered Jerusalem in a procession. Only his would have been a powerful display of military might...soldiers, horses, weapons all on display. The two processions would have contrasted starkly...and that matters.

This whole King of the Jews bit makes no sense at all without a grasp of Israel's story from the Old Testament.

Way back in Israel's history, the Israelites wanted a king to protect them...to save them. Surrounding tribes were harassing them. Chaos and corruption plagued their tribal leaders. They were afraid. And they thought a powerful king could defeat their enemies and bring order.

But as the prophet Samuel predicted, most of the kings were more about their own power and wealth than the good of the people. Their own corruption and chaos led Israel into defeat and exile.

After their return, they held fast to the promise of a new and improved king. One who would defeat their enemies and restore them as a free people. A king like David maybe. But also one who would rule in justice and peace.

Many came to believe Jesus was that king. Here at the entrance to Jerusalem, many of them gather to welcome their king. Anticipation was high.

It all starts with such joy. But as the week goes on, the foreboding atmosphere grows denser...tension builds.

Jesus is arrested, tried, and condemned.

With Jesus on trial, we too are on trial. We are faced with a choice. Pilate and the priests represent the kingdom of the world...a kingdom dependent on powerful rulers who use force to maintain order.

Jesus said, my kingdom is not of that world.

Which kingdom do we choose? Which king do we choose?

Do we choose a king like Caesar? A king who projects strength and power? A king who depends on violence to keep order?

The priests did. The leaders of a people who should have claimed only God as their king...said we have no king but Caesar.

Caesar had the power to crucify. He had a powerful military who could crush any followers of Jesus who rose up to defend him.

The priests backed Caesar and the empire, not because they were especially loyal to Rome...but because he could maintain the status quo. He could keep the peace, however much that peace depended on crushing opposition.

Even now, when we fragile humans are harassed, oppressed, and scared...we too often want that kind of ruler. And again, sometimes Christians are guilty of making Jesus into the same kind of king that Caesar was.

So I kind of end up back where I was last week. We don't handle the idea of kings well.

When Christ is proclaimed as king in our time, it can take on strong antisemitic tones and anti-Muslim tones. Claiming Christ as King can lead people to justify cruelty and violence in Christ's name.

If we are going to proclaim Jesus as king, then we darn well better keep this image in front of us...this image of a beaten and bloody king, carrying his cross in a tragic and gruesome procession to the place of his death. What Jesus calls his enthronement. Not on a lavish throne, at least not yet. But rather on a cross.

If we ignore that image, we will remake Jesus in the image of Caesar...we will make him into a ruler who does things exactly the way earthly rulers have too often done...and when we choose the power of earthly rulers, Jesus ends up on a cross, again. God ends up on a cross.

There is not great agreement about why Pilate was so insistent on inscribing King of the Jews on the cross.

But the fact that it was there and in all three of the known languages of their world takes us back to John 3: “For God so loved the world...”

The violence of the world put Jesus on the cross. The cross was a sign of Rome’s power and cruelty. But for Jesus the cross instead was a sign of immense love. Even for those who put him there.

Today, we find ourselves in tumultuous times. I confess I am struggling greatly with preaching Lent and Holy Week in the midst of all this. It seems to me that our devotion to worldly power has led us to a dark place.

But today, we join with so many others over the centuries at the foot of the cross. We struggle to truly understand what the cross means.

A crucified king makes no sense. That is perhaps the best place to land today. A crucified king makes no sense.

John has led us through Jesus’ ministry through the signs that point to Jesus as God. John has assured us that eternal life...here...now can be experienced through a relationship with Jesus.

This scene is jarring. It calls to question how eternal life can be there on that cross.

And yet...that’s exactly where God’s grace...God’s love for the world... speaks loudest.

And however dark the scene we read today is...however dark our times might be, we do also hold fast to our faith that even when all seems lost, Jesus will rise.

And so will we.