

## 28 March 2021, The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

We know what happens later. The “hosanna’s” that greeted Jesus when he entered Jerusalem are turned to shouts of “Crucify him!” The Palms which they strewed on the road are replaced by the whip on his back, and the abuse he suffered on his way to Golgotha. To say what we commemorate today is ironic is a fantastic understatement. He comes to Jerusalem; he enters the city riding on a young donkey. This is how victorious Roman generals would enter a conquered city. It was a stylized statement of humility—a token that the commander acknowledges that he did not do it on his own; he owes his victory to the legionaries and his officers, to the gods, ultimately to Caesar. The conqueror is just a simple, functionary of the Roman State, doing his duty.

The crowds recognized the meaning of Jesus’ entry. They strew his way with garments and branches, a sign of respect and subservience. They shout, ...*blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest!* The Romans would have noted this slogan, and it would have been like putting gasoline on a fire. The crowd was clearly giving Jesus a Messianic title, anticipating the Messiah would reestablish Israel’s sovereignty. David had freed Israel from foreign domination and united a fractured nation. The crowd clearly expected the same from Jesus, riding in on a donkey.

It was not just the Romans who would have reacted. In Luke’s Gospel the Pharisees ask Jesus to tell his disciples to stop the parade. They knew the Romans would not discriminate between those who followed Jesus and those who did not if the troops were ordered to break up the demonstration. The Romans enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for having no patience with civil disobedience, let alone insurrection. Their way of dealing with such things was swift, brutal, and thorough.

Yet there is one important difference. Unlike a Roman general who would have gone directly to the Temple and placed the Roman standard before the Holy of Holies, making clear that the Jews were under the Roman heel, Jesus went to the Temple, looked around and left. This must have struck everyone as odd, incomprehensible. They likely expected Jesus to stride into the Temple—the center of Jewish self-identity, the dwelling place of God on earth—and claim his Messiahship, declare a revolution against Rome in particular, and paganism in general. He did not. He looked around and left both Temple and city. What a letdown! At least some of them must have thought: “What a lot of fuss and feathers for nothing!”

We know what happens later. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus first demonstrated by word and sign that he is the Messiah, and they begin to get it, but don’t quite grasp what Jesus means. He then teaches his followers, and the crowds, by word and sign what kind of Messiah he is. The teaching reaches its highest expression in Holy Week, and we are beginning today. Jesus enters Jerusalem with the trappings of a Messiah all around him, but he refuses to be defined by the crowds’ or his disciples’ expectations. Whatever the donkey, strewn garments and palms, and nifty slogans meant to the crowd, or the Romans, or the Jewish power brokers, or his disciples, they meant something radically different to Jesus. He rides into Jerusalem like a Roman conqueror, but fulfills no one’s preconceived notions; and in five days he leaves Jerusalem for the last time carry the instrument for his own execution.

Why? Because Jesus came not to establish an earthly empire but, out of love, to free the whole world from sin and death, and to offer such freedom to everyone. As Paul writes in Roman, 5: *God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us* (v8). The sign of Jesus the Messiah is not conquering all enemies through power but living, dying, and rising again in humility. Again, from Paul, Philippians 2:5ff: *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the Name that is above every name, so that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

*Let the same mind be in you...*, writes Paul. We follow Jesus the Messiah by aspiring to be like him; with his help, practicing humility in all our relationships and environments, to the glory of God the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.