

A Clash of Two Parades

A Sermon Preached in Glebe Road United Church,
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Luke 19:28-40

The sun was coming up over the hills around Jerusalem. It would be another hot, dry, dusty day in the great city, but this particular day would always be remembered by the world as the first Palm Sunday. It was the first day of the week, and the mainly Jewish inhabitants of the city went back to work after the quiet interlude of the Sabbath, which had been celebrated the previous day. Things were especially busy around the Temple, because the feast of the Passover would soon begin. In the next few days Jews from all over the region would make their way to Jerusalem, their holy city, and the population would swell from 40,000 to 200,000 people for a few sweltering days. It had been that way for generations.

For the past century, the Jewish homeland and its great Jerusalem fortress had been under the control of Rome. The Roman authorities had long ago discovered that the best way to keep control over its far-flung empire was to buy off the local leaders of the people – give them a little power and the wealth that comes with power, so long as they collected the annual tribute and kept the people under control. In Jerusalem, it was the Temple leaders who had been given this power. The Chief Priests, the elders and scribes acted on behalf of the pagan Romans in a delicate political dance that required them to support the foreign occupiers of God’s Promised-Land while carrying out the rituals and obligations of the Jewish faith.

The feast of the Passover was an especially challenging time for these Temple leaders because it recalled the acts of God against Pharaoh and the Egyptian army – another pagan power. According to the story, the angel of death struck down the eldest child in every household in Egypt but “passed over” the houses of the Jews because Moses had told them to splash the blood of the sacrificial lamb on the doorposts and lintel of their houses. As a result of this final plague against the Egyptians, Pharaoh finally agreed to let the Israelite slaves leave Egypt (Ex. 12:21-27).

It didn’t take much imagination to connect the present-day oppression under the pagan Romans with the ancient oppression suffered by the Israelites from the Egyptians in the Passover story, and the Temple authorities looked like complete hypocrites when these collaborators with Rome tried to lead the people in the celebration of the Passover. The Romans understood the delicacy of this situation and the special danger they faced at this time of year. And so as the sun rose that first Palm Sunday, the Roman garrison in Jerusalem was getting ready for the Passover too.

The soldiers on the western wall watched the horizon, and polished their helmets. This very day the governor would arrive from his palace in Caesarea on Mediterranean coast, about 60 miles away. Like all the governors before him Pontius Pilate would personally

take command of Jerusalem during the time of the Passover festival. The Romans knew the story of the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery, and they expected trouble. They knew that for the Jewish people coming to Jerusalem, Caesar now played the role of Pharaoh, and the army would go on high alert during the Passover. When the governor came he would bring two battalions of hardened troops to reinforce the garrison. Soon the shouts went out down the line. The governor rounded the curve in the road and came into view on his horse. Behind him came the captains of the guard and his personal attendants. Behind them, marching in straight rows came the infantrymen, their stamping feet raising dust, their leather armour creaking with every step, their helmets glistening in the sun. By now, it was almost noon and the sun was high. The heat of the day was building, and every soldier on the road gave thanks that he would soon find shade and water and a place to sit down. The Jewish pilgrims who had been pushed off the road to make way for the Roman troops watched sullenly on the sidelines as the modern day Egyptians marched past. The feast of the Passover had once again become a cruel joke. Where was God now? Why did God not protect the great city and God's Temple. The Romans knew that many in the crowd were bandits and terrorists who would use the festival as an excuse to cause trouble if they could. But their swords were ready for any trouble. Break a few heads and crucify the ringleaders – that was how they would deal with these people.

As Pilate entered the western gate of the City to fanfare and cheering from the local troops, another procession was approaching the city from the east. Jesus of Nazareth was one of the thousands of Jews coming to Jerusalem for the Passover. He had been on the road for several weeks, slowly making his way from his base in Galilee in the north, visiting the towns and villages along the way and proclaiming the coming of something he called the kingdom of God. His message was a dangerous one: The God of Israel was the real king and Caesar was not. This was a message that resonated with the rebels and terrorists who yearned for the defeat of the Roman legions. Perhaps this Jesus was the leader they had been waiting for, the military Messiah, the Son of the great king David who had conquered Jerusalem for God's people in the first place. The Messiah had been the subject of prophecy ever since the Babylonians had destroyed the original temple. Perhaps he had finally come in this man Jesus of Nazareth; perhaps this Jesus would be the one to drive the hated Romans out. Jesus was able to heal the sick and drive out demons so God was clearly with him. Here was a man who obviously had great power. But so far he had infuriated his disciples by refusing to use that power. He taught that they should love our enemies; if a Roman soldier ordered them to carry his pack for a mile he told them that they should carry it and take it an extra mile as well. What kind of strategy was that? He taught that his followers should give their worldly goods away and put our trust in God. And as for power, he taught that the leaders should be slaves to everyone else if they wanted to lead. He taught that forgiveness and reconciliation was the only way to secure peace. Perhaps this was just a trick to lull the Romans into thinking that he was not a threat, and once inside the city he would show his true colours. That's what many in the crowd thought that Sunday afternoon when he approached the city on a donkey.

Many in the crowd had place their hope in this man. They were ready to join the revolt against the Romans. All they needed was a leader, a Messiah, someone like Moses who

was close to God, who could bring plagues against those who were enslaving God's people. These people responded with enthusiasm to this second procession into Jerusalem for all the wrong reasons, and shouted:

Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven. (Luke 19:38)

Two parades; two world-views; two ways of living. In the first parade the political, economic and religious leaders of the world stand together, held up by the force of arms. This parade offers peace and security through the use of force. Crush your enemies; rule with an iron fist; organize your world so that you remain on top and in control. This is Caesar's world, and while the Roman Empire is long gone it has been replaced with other kings, despots and political bosses down through the ages right into our day.

The second parade is led by the force of sacrificial love. It is what the world would be like if God and not Caesar and his successors were in control. If you want to be a leader in this world then you must be a servant of all. In this world the first are last and the last, first.

Two thousand years later we in our day know how the story unfolded in that last week of Jesus' life. The powers in the city – the Council, the High Priests and the Roman authorities – would join forces against this “King of the Jews” and he would die a painful and lonely death on a cross outside the city walls. And as far as these powers were concerned that should have been end of it.

But somehow it wasn't the end of it at all. His followers, who had scattered like a flock of frightened sheep when he was arrested, proclaimed that he was risen from the dead and that they had seen him. And then they put their lives on the line for his vision of peace and justice, and died as well. Others took their place. The cult of the crucified Messiah would not die no matter how many of his followers were arrested, intimidated or killed. It was the height of irony that 300 years later, the great Roman Empire itself recruited the Christian church within its domains in a futile attempt to unify its people and strengthen his failing hold on power. But it didn't work and the empire fell anyway. The earthly power represented by Pontius Pilate and his army on the road to Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday became a thing of the past, and are remembered only because of their connection with the single man on a donkey coming into Jerusalem that day.

There seems to be something about the exploiting and destructive power of armies that is temporary in our world. They enjoy power for a time but eventually every army is defeated and replaced by another. The message of Jesus of Nazareth is that God works through another kind of power. God's power is not destructive but creative, not exploitative but nurturing. God's power arises out of weakness instead of strength, and its practitioners are servants rather than leaders. And it is this kind of power that lasts. The world has been created in such a way that it is only this kind of power that survives.

Still the battle between the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God continues. The choice between coercion, violence and power on the one hand and loving your enemy and serving others on the other remains a choice that we are all called to make in

our time and our place. The man on the donkey continues to call us away from systems of domination and oppression. And we are torn between the procession of armies and military power and the call to peace and reconciliation; between protection of our privileges and love for our neighbour.

Two processions went into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. From the west came the power of empire, the power of this world, and this procession continues as long as there are empires and kings – in this procession are the soldiers marching into battle, and their leaders making deals that allow them to remain in power. And from the east came Jesus of Nazareth and his procession of victims and powerless people – the poor of every age, the oppressed, the blind and the captives. Who will we choose to follow in this holy week? Will we play it safe and line up with the powerful forces of our day, and hope they don't turn against us, or will we follow the rag-tag band of the Prince of Peace. For most of us, there is no choice. Whether we like it or not, we are already committed to the powerful forces that control our world. We have responsibilities, others are counting on us to care for them and we have made our bargain with those in power. There is nothing surprising or unusual about that – it's been going on for as long as there have been powerful people and armies to support them. But this week, this holy week, we have a chance to hear another voice. As our Lenten pilgrimage arrives at the foot of the cross we will encounter a source of love and forgiveness that breaks the power of every tyrant. In his death and resurrection the crucified one overcomes the violence of the powerful with new life and brings good news to the poor. As we listen to his dying voice from the cross we will discover that both processions that arrived in Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday have ended up at the cross. The difference is that for the powerful, death is final and ultimate, but for those who follow this strange Galilean, death is the beginning of new life. And for this we give thanks to God.

Amen