

The Procession

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
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Luke 22:39-23:49

On the first Palm Sunday many centuries ago, two processions entered the city of Jerusalem. One procession came from the east, and the other arrived from the west. We have just heard the story of what happened when they met in the heart of the city. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe these events in their book, *The Last Week*.

From the west, an imperial procession wound its way towards Jerusalem. Pontius Pilate rode a large war horse before a column of the Roman cavalry. He traveled to Jerusalem with troops because the regional governors always came for major Jewish festivals. They looked for trouble and brutally squelched any signs of rebellion. The Roman army was on high alert for Passover, the feast which celebrates the liberation of the Jewish people.

Imagine the impact of the imperial procession on the local folks. Here comes the Roman army on magnificent horses, their hooves stirring up great dust clouds on the horizon. They are followed by rows of foot soldiers, outfitted in leather armor and helmets. Each one carries a weapon. The sounds of the approaching procession fill the people with fear. First, there is the thunder of marching feet. Then come beating drums, creaking leather, shouting officers, and the clink, clink, clink of metal bridles. The people stand in awed silence as a military machine fills their streets.

This procession from the west also bears banners and golden eagles mounted on poles. They gleam and sparkle in the sun. These are the signs of the Roman emperor. Even in the provinces his symbols are held high to remind all that the emperor is not only the ruler of Rome, but also has divine rights as the son of God.

On the first Palm Sunday, the emperor's procession entered Jerusalem. It was a demonstration of Roman power that imposed imperial theology, oppressive taxes, and military rule on its subjects.

On that same day, a different procession entered Jerusalem from the east. This procession was led by Jesus and included his followers from Galilee in the north, and peasants on the outskirts of the city. This entrance was on a more human scale. Jesus rode a donkey down from the Mt. of Olives, and his disciples walked alongside him. The sounds all came from the local people who were cheering and waving palm branches.

But this procession also had its powerful symbols. Everyone knew the ancient prophecy that someday a new king would arrive in Jerusalem. This king would come into the city on a young donkey colt and he would bring peace to all the people. He would banish war and weapons and chariots, all of those things on parade on the west side of town.

The people longed for this king who would bring them peace. Generations and armies came and went, and still the people yearned for God's way of righteousness and peace to rule their lives. Jesus tapped this yearning on the first Palm Sunday, as he entered Jerusalem. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. The message of this procession was so spiritually powerful that the local religious rulers became afraid. They said to Jesus, *Teacher, order your disciples to stop.*

Two processions marched toward the city. The kingdom of Caesar and the Kingdom of God collided in Jerusalem.

The outcome was predictable, given all we know about human history and the abuse of power. Caesar prevailed in the days that followed. Make no mistake: the empire controlled the events during the last days of Jesus' life. Only the empire could order crucifixion. And while it was a common form of execution, crucifixion was only used against those who denied imperial authority.

Jerusalem was already a city of great contrasts before God and Caesar's processions collided. It was the center of Jewish life and a place of spiritual pilgrimage. It was also a place of intrigue and corruption where local tyrants ruled on behalf of the distant emperor. In Jerusalem there was an extreme disparity between the rich and the poor. Land was confiscated regularly and the rich got richer while the rural poor became urban beggars. The city was a contradiction of piety and corruption, wealth and poverty, beauty and violence.

Today you and I gather in the city, with all of its splendor and brokenness. The American city of the 21st century still holds the extremes of human experience: Beauty and violence; opportunity and despair; community and estrangement. All these things live side by side in the city, close to the heart of God.

We come to this Palm Sunday as people who know the privileges of power and wealth and empire. And yet, we come by a different route this morning. We do not follow the imperial cavalry today. The trappings of Caesar's empire rotted and turned to dust long ago.

We follow the man who is destined for Calvary. We live this story of Jesus' entry again and again to take our place in the right procession. We reenact the humble parade to remember who we are and where we came from. We line up behind Jesus and that raw young colt because we know that time will prove the way of Jesus to be the way of truth.

Here in this northern climate we wave our palms from trees we cannot grow. We sing Hosannas, a word we do not use. But they become beautiful as our palms and voices blend together and we remember the final days of Jesus' life.

We are still yearning for the kingdom of God, a place where all God's people live in justice and peace. We know from Jesus that God's kingdom is marked by compassion and generosity. It is where fear is replaced by faith. It is where Peter is forgiven his betrayal and turned into a leader. It is where criminals are restored and invited to a banquet. In this kingdom, God's love never ends.

Two processions entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: two kingdoms and two paths which offered starkly different choices. The same paths and the same choices are always before us, year in and year out. We continually choose between the domination of the empire and the grace of God's kingdom.

I urge you to walk closely with Jesus in Holy Week, even when the choice seems foolish. Take your place in his procession in this week as we continue to long for the kingdom of God.