

THE PALM CALM

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The Holy Week had begun and Jesus and his followers drew nearer to the Holy City of Jerusalem. The Sabbath was over and life in the city was chaotic as people prepared for the Feast of the Passover. You will recall that Passover celebrated the period in time when after decades of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites were set free by a grieving pharaoh whose first born son and heir had died in God's attempt to loosen Pharaoh's grip on the Israelites.

It was the greatest feast of the Jewish year and everyone prepared for the feast and often traveled long distances to be in Jerusalem to celebrate this great feast at the temple.

So here it was, another Jewish Passover High Festival about to take place and Jerusalem was full of pilgrims. The city pulsed with business people hoping to cash in on the crowds desire for trinkets, souvenirs, lambs for a sacrifice, rooms to sleep in and restaurants to provide food for the visitors. In short, the city rocked with activity and excitement.

The Jewish leaders were always concerned that violence might break out as some hothead tried to stir up Israeli nationalism against the Roman occupation.

The Roman governor was also aware of possible disturbance so put every man he had on alert and all leaves were cancelled. In the months of very hot weather, the governor often moved to the seaside city of Caesarea. However, for Passover, the governor planned to return to Jerusalem to take personal charge over affairs. The governor was fairly new to this part of the world. His name was Pontius Pilate and he was not thrilled to be in Jerusalem. But, there was no way he could have stayed away. He had to appear to be and actually needed to be in personal charge through the Passover festivities.

So we have two groups approaching Jerusalem the morning of the Sunday before Passover. They were two very different processions – one a peasant or average man procession and the other an imperial procession. From the east comes a man named Jesus of Galilee, son of Joseph and Mary, from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message about the kingdom of God.

From the west we have Pontius Pilate robed in his role as a Roman governor entering by the main gate either riding on a majestic horse or standing in an elaborate horse drawn chariot. He would be surrounded by a legion of soldiers in full regalia, heavily armed, sword and shields glistening in the sunlight. His message proclaimed the power of empire, the Roman Empire.

The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to the crucifixion of Jesus.

Can you imagine the imperial procession? Cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. The sound of it all: the marching feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums and the swirling of dust. From the great biblical movies like Ben Hur we have seen over the years, we have a mental picture of this awesome show of power.

As Pilate processed into the city with such a show of military might, the crowds would be mildly welcoming and respectful but fairly mute at this show of force deliberately played out to remind them yet again of their conquered status.

Jesus on the other hand rode a borrowed donkey into the city. He was followed by a band of supporters on foot who watched carefully all that was going on. They were clearly not armed. Many others thronged the area and shouted with excitement as this Jesus came near to them. They had cut down palm branches to wave as they shouted Hosanna to this man. They always waved palm branches when they had a special guest to welcome. The crowd was expectant – what was this man Jesus about to do and was he really the long awaited Messiah?

Jesus would have known that Pilate would process in full might into Jerusalem in a show of force immediately after Sabbath ended and Passover week was about to unfold. Jesus, in his turn according to St. Mark in his Gospel narrative, appears to have thought about his own entrance into Jerusalem and prearranged some of the events. He knew where the donkey could be found and sent the disciples to bring it to him. When the donkey arrived, he rode down from the Mount of Olives and into the city.

Jesus' procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory and violence of empire that ruled the world. Jesus procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God. Marcus Borg the theologian in his book *The Last Week*, maintains this contrast – between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar – is central to the story of Jesus and early Christianity.

It is important to remember that this confrontation between these two kingdoms continued the last week of Jesus' life. We all know the week ended with Jesus' execution by the powers who ruled this world. Holy Week is the story of this confrontation.

What was this excitement all about a stranger witnessing this event would ask? It is Jesus who we believe is the long awaited Messiah they would shout. Really, he is the Messiah, the one who will lead us out of Rome's bondage?

Can this really be? We have waited for centuries and now it is in front of us in our lifetime? You can imagine the screams of joy. Others would wonder why he was on a donkey which is a symbol of humility and certainly not greatness.

Very confusing they would think. The disciples however, hearing all this shouting, were on edge. What if the Roman governor hears people saying Jesus will rise up and defeat

Rome? What will happen to all of us? Jesus and maybe we as well will be arrested and maybe even executed. This fear was palpable in the midst of the joyous shouting and excitement of the crowd.

The disciples knew they were in the midst of some momentous occasion but were not sure what it fully meant. What was Jesus planning to do in Jerusalem? Why did he insist on coming here now when he knew he had so many enemies not to mention the Romans who are jittery at the best of times at Passover celebrations in Jerusalem? Was Jesus mad, just reckless or did he know all along what he was doing?

In the meantime, the disciples got caught up in the excitement of the crowd which greeted their entrance into Jerusalem. Whatever was ahead for them, they were prepared to see it through with this man they loved and who they believed was specially marked by God for greatness.

You and I have been on a pilgrimage to the cross with Jesus for nearly six weeks. It has meant seeing ourselves with Jesus and trying to catch a glimpse of what he represented to the world as a result.

Mark speaks of the blind man regaining his sight and following Jesus on the way. To see means for the believer to see and understand that the way Christ invites us to go involves following him to Jerusalem. This concept of the way is very old. It intimates that following Christ is a journey, forever moving on to death and resurrection.

Thus we have the twofold theme that leads to Palm Sunday. Genuine discipleship, following Jesus, means following him to Jerusalem, the place first of confrontation with the domination system and secondly with death and resurrection. These are the themes of Holy Week which follows Palm Sunday. Indeed they are the two themes of Lent and of the Christian life.

Two processions entered Jerusalem on that day we call Palm Sunday. The same question, the same alternative, faces those who would be faithful to Jesus today. Which of the two processions are we in? Which procession do we want to be in? This is the question of Palm Sunday and the week which is about to unfold.

Jesus urges us to be on the journey with him. True, it may not all be easy going and indeed there may be dangers but to follow Jesus is to keep moving, to be in the middle of life not standing on the edges. It is not to escape from the world but to be in the very centre of life where the action is.

So the disciples threw themselves into the excitement of Palm Sunday and shouted Hosanna along with the others. It was only that night that reality set in and fear began to gnaw at them. They knew the clock could not be turned back. They were about to face the full force of the religious and political establishment.

Holy Week had begun and the next seven days would be traumatic in their lives and in the ensuing centuries.

Holy Week provides that time for us to experience the essence of the faith. Fundamental is the belief that God who created the world sent his son into the world to redeem us and to show us how far God was willing to go to convince us of his love. Equally fundamental is to walk with Christ and witness his death and the resurrection. Christ the victim; Christ the victor!

So then, the question of Palm Sunday is this: are we walking with the powers of the world through the west gate into Jerusalem or are we entering the east gate of Jerusalem walking in with Jesus? We do have that choice and indeed we have to make this choice daily.

Amen