

## **Parades and Funeral Processions**

Matthew 21:1-11

Matthew 26:6-16

Matthew 27:1-2, 11-17, 20-23, 26-31

The streets of Jerusalem were bustling in the week before Passover. Jewish people from all over the region had come to the city to celebrate the holy day. Religious leaders brought their faithful here to celebrate together. Merchants had set up shops and stalls to accommodate the needs of so many visitors. Extra Roman soldiers were deployed to keep the peace. Jesus and his disciples had already made their way down from Galilee to Jericho and followed the crowds west toward Jerusalem, resting at Bethany atop the Mount of Olives. When they paraded down the hill, Jesus entered the city riding on a donkey. He was surrounded by a jubilant cheering crowd, but the rest of the city was in turmoil, asking “Who is this?”

Who is this? Who is this man who comes silently riding on a borrowed donkey while his disciples hail him as the Son of David, the blessed one who comes in the name of the Lord? Who is he? The cheering multitude has an answer, but I cannot help but feel that it falls a little flat: he is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. Isn’t there more to Jesus than his name, his occupation, and his hometown? Could not the crowd have given a more robust answer, something weighty and theological? Maybe they did not need to. Their parade already said so much. Jesus’ arrival on the back of a donkey is a fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy about the coming king (Zechariah 9:9). The timing of his arrival during Passover corresponds with ancient Jewish expectations that the Messiah will come during the sacred feast. Even his approach down the Mount of Olives fulfills the prediction that the savior of Israel will set his feet upon that mountain (Zechariah 14:4).

Certainly this cheering crowd knew they sang into the city the “King of Israel, David’s royal son, who in the Lord’s name comest, the king and blessed One.” But did they see the irony in their parade? Did they understand that their long-awaited king looked farcical before the legions of Rome led by commanders on horseback. Or were they beside themselves, this unlikely “army” singing and dancing and enjoying this moment with “King Jesus” on his long-eared charger.<sup>1</sup>

Who is this? Somehow I think those crowds had every idea and no idea. On that first “Palm Sunday” they celebrated the true Messiah, the true King of Israel, the blessed One. They celebrated with all their hearts. But somehow I think they still had no idea what would happen in the week to come. They had no idea what kind of Messiah their “King Jesus” would be. They had no idea that their parade would soon be a funeral procession.

In the days ahead, Jesus would upset the temple leaders with his raucous teachings and overturning of tables. A nameless woman would anoint Jesus for burial with precious oil while the disciples argued about more practical ways to use her gift. Judas would sell out his teacher for thirty pieces of silver – maybe four months’ wages. Jesus would pray desperately in the

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<sup>1</sup> Z Holler. *Jesus’ Radical Message: Subversive Sermons for Today’s Seekers*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock) 2010. p.78

garden of Gethsemane while his disciples dozed off. And finally, Jesus would be arrested and given a make-believe trial where the question would be asked again: Who are you?

This time it is Pilate who asks. Are you the King of the Jews? Jesus is silent before this and every other accusation, and the governor is astounded. Richard Foster writes about the spiritual discipline of silence saying that our tongue is our most powerful weapon of manipulation, of adjusting our public image. We use words for self-justification. Silence opens to us the freedom to let God be our justifier.<sup>2</sup> Jesus makes no effort here to justify himself before Pilate or the chief priests. Another kind of parade begins as Jesus is led toward the cross while soldiers jeer him singing, "Hail, King of the Jews!" I wonder if Jesus remembers those words he taught his disciples upon a hillside in Galilee: Blessed [is the one] who is persecuted, for [his] is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10).

The streets of Jerusalem were bustling when our group visited on a Saturday morning. Jewish residents were indoors, observing the Sabbath rest, but as our bus pulled up to the Damascus Gate we jostled to get ahead of another large group of tourists. On that particular morning, we had come to the Old City to walk the Via Dolorosa, following the fourteen Stations of the Cross. The Via Dolorosa is not inside any serene sanctuary, although there are chapels along the way. The narrow, cobbled streets are filled with people. Shopkeepers are unrelenting in their sales pitches with pedestrians who slow down long enough to peek at their wares. Food vendors sell baked goods and fresh-squeezed juice. Muslim school children run through the crowds on their way to class. And the pilgrims. Group by group they process down the Way of Sorrows, weeping and singing and marking the journey of Jesus from his trial to crucifixion. Our group was no different. At each station we paused for a reading and a prayer.

At the eighth station, our parade of 23 pilgrims joined with the great crowd of people who followed Jesus; a crowd, as Luke tells it, that included women who beat their breasts and lamented over him (Luke 23:27). At that eighth station where Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem, Pastor Jack read this reflection by Samia Khoury, a Catholic Palestinian woman:

I feel distressed because the weeping has not stopped and the women of Jerusalem, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, have had their share of weeping . . . and the weeping still goes on, because the suffering and dispossession has not stopped. . . . But I am not bitter because I feel my faith has helped me and so many of us, to be able to survive. . . . When you have been through the Crucifixion and all the suffering of Holy Week, then it is climaxed by the Resurrection. This alone gives you hope that no suffering will continue for eternity and that there is bound to be a Resurrection and an end to weeping. . . . We pray for all women everywhere, especially those who weep and especially for the women of Jerusalem today. We pray for each time right is obscured by might and the weak and the poor are marginalized and we pray for ourselves that we may have the mind of Christ to love and respect all God's children.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Foster. *Celebration of Discipline*. (New York: Harper Collins) 1998. p101.

<sup>3</sup> Allison Hilliard and Betty Jane Bailey. *Living Stones Pilgrimage*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame) 1999. p63.

As we closed our reading with Samia's prayer, a shopkeeper approached our group from across the narrow street. I presumed him to be a Muslim, or maybe he offered that information. I cannot remember. He shook Jack's hand and thanked our little rag-tag parade for remembering the suffering of Jerusalem and the suffering of her people. He begged us not to forget.

Who is Jesus? When does Matthew finally reveal the answer to his Holy Week question? The answer comes not at the Triumphal Entry parade and not at the mock trial before a powerless earthly governor. Who is Jesus? We are finally told by a Roman centurion who looks on as Jesus cries out in his forsakenness and breathes his last: "Truly this man was God's Son" (Matt 27:54). Who is this Jesus? He is God who suffers every inhumanity and dispossession. In the crucified Christ, the very Creator of the world identifies totally with our forsakenness, our anguish, even our dying. The funeral procession of Christ is the good news that the King of the Universe suffers with and for his beloved children.

We are an Easter people, and while we march mournfully through Holy Week, we will not forget that the funeral procession will become a parade once again when on Sunday morning life triumphs over death, forgiveness triumphs over punishment, and good conquers evil forever. But between now and then, I invite you to ponder this Holy Week, "Who is Jesus?" Who is he to you, personally, and who do you believe he is for the world? Is he more than a just a prophet from Nazareth in Galilee? Is he more than our western Christian culture has told us to expect? If we indeed call him king, are we prepared to follow him into humility, into peace, into the suffering of our neighbors near and far? If we believe that he is God's own Son, are we prepared to commit our lives to him, the blessed One who gave his life for us?