

April 9, 2017

Palm Sunday

Commentary

Matthew 21: 1-12

As Passover approaches Pontius Pilate leads a procession of Imperial Roman forces with their Calvary and foot soldiers into Jerusalem.

They march in through the main gate, the Western Gate, from their headquarters on the Mediterranean coast.

They march in, in all their power and glory to reinforce the garrison on the Temple Mount.

They march in as they do every year before the high and politically explosive festival of **Passover**, to strike fear and awe into the conquered people.

Imagine the spectacle. Weapons, helmets, golden eagles mounted on poles. Imagine the sun, glinting on metal and gold. Hear the pounding of horse hooves, the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the beating of drums.

Imagine all this military spectacle, all this celebration of Empire, of might makes right.

Now, imagine the surrounding, silent, non-responsive, crowd of on lookers. They know all too well **who is in charge and what is really going on**.

Let's turn our imagination to the other gate the lowly Eastern gate. Our **Gospel** story tells of another procession on that very same day, another triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but through the opposite gate, that lowly Eastern Gate. It tells of another crowd and another kind of celebration. It is not big or powerful, or self-important, but **Matthew's** version sure gets the crowd involved and gets everyone talking, everyone asking, "**Who is this? What is going on here?**"

What a difference a gate makes.

Sometimes when we want to make a point we exaggerate the details... Just look at what **Matthew** does to **Mark's** original story of the triumphant entry. **Mark** tells the story with obvious echoes of **Zechariah's** prophecy: **Jesus** as a king of peace humbly rides on a donkey into the holy city. **Matthew** quotes the passage verbatim and just to

make certain that his readers are paying attention he goes over the top, with a literal interpretation of the poetic parallelism in the passage.

Now, can you imagine **Matthew's Jesus** riding into Jerusalem on two beasts of burden "*on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey?*"

Can you imagine such a scene? Well no one else could. I've scoured the internet for just one image and have come up empty. How does someone ride on two quite different sized animals at the same time, without looking foolish, without injuring one's self, without belonging to the circus? So, can we see that the focus on a lactating mare and her little colt nuzzling alongside is certainly not the same picture as Pontius Pilate entering on a warhorse?

Now **Matthew's** version of the story is starting to get his reader's attention.

Who is this? What is going on here?

Matthew wants to tell his faith community that there is something greater than the Roman Empire here, something greater than the Temple here, something greater than the power to prophesy here. **Jesus** is the true Prophet, Priest and King. **Jesus** is all three messianic expectations in one, but with a twist. **Jesus** brings forth a totally different kind of Kingdom.

When **Jesus** enters Jerusalem, **Matthew** tells us the whole city was thrown into an uproar. The last time **Matthew** tells us that all Jerusalem is upset is when the wise men come from the East seeking '**the babe born to be King of the Jews**'. The wise men come with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh: Gold for king, frankincense for priestly office and myrrh for embalming the prophets who always meet an untimely end in Jerusalem. **Matthew** says; prophet, priest and king at *birth*, prophet, priest and king on *Palm Sunday*.

Matthew tells us that when these three messianic titles merge there is an explosion of expectation. Something even better arises. **Jesus** is the whole meal deal. That is **Matthew's** answer to **who is this? What is going on here?**

As we have seen, **Jesus** rides into Jerusalem on a donkey as the antithesis to Roman military might, and as a corrective to the falsehood of redemptive violence. He rides in stark contrast to Rome's bloody pretense of Peace through Victory.

In **Matthew's** version, **Jesus** immediately enters the Temple, overturns the tables of the money changers, drives out the animals to be sold for sacrifice, and challenging the religious empire of blood sacrifice to cover our sins. **Jesus** challenges both kinds of bloodletting empire, military and religious on the same day with the same purpose.

Also, **Matthew's** version has children streaming into the Temple, in celebration along with the blind and lame who are healed there by **Jesus**. Children and the handicapped were refused entry into the temple, but not anymore with **Jesus'** kind of kingdom.

What kind of Kingdom is **Matthew** talking about?

It is the alternative to the military kingdom and the religious kingdom of his day.

Matthew says **Jesus' kind of Kingdom** rejects violence, death, and the sacrifice of living creatures.

It rejects any kind of **blood** as having any kind of saving significance.

Matthew says **Jesus' kind of Kingdom** draws in those who are excluded from the political system and the Temple tradition.

The judgement against the disabled now turns into healing and the restoration of true worship.

The exclusion of the impure and the immature, now turn into a celebration of inclusion in the temple.

The children sing hosanna. The blind and the lame are made whole.

Now, the distinction between pure and impure is **out** and unity is **in**.

The killing of innocent animals is **out** and the restoration of relationships is **in**.

The concern for commerce is **out** and the call to prayer is **in**.

God's New Day is unfolding on **Palm Sunday** showing us that we are all in this together.

God's New Day is unfolding on **Palm Sunday** but so is the resistance to it. The myth of redemptive violence both religious and political will stubbornly seek to exact its price.

We know the rest of the story.

Application for Today

Friends it is not **blood** sacrifice that makes us and others whole.

It is *love's* sacrifice that makes us and others whole and holy.

It is not spilt **blood** but *allowing love*.

It is not just any love but the *allowing love of Jesus*, which the **Spirit** imparts.

Let's hold on, through Holy Week, to the Kingdom that **Matthew's** Gospel reveals.