

Entrance as Messiah: Palm Sunday, 2017; Year A, Lent 6;
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When I began preparation of this homily for Palm Sunday, the first thing that came to mind was marching around the yard at Christ Church, Anacortes. This is true even though just a few years ago Diane and I visited Palestine and walked down the Mount of Olives toward Jerusalem, perhaps following the path Jesus took. This way of remembering Palm Sunday led me to wonder if I am missing something about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday.

Our reading from the Gospel of Matthew is not an account of a casual stroll in the park or around the church yard. It is a carefully crafted description, with biblical and geographic references, of an entry into Jerusalem, the City of David. It is an entrance fraught with historical, biblical and theological implications, including the great themes of the nature of Christ, the saving work of Christ, and the end time. The importance of the story is suggested by the fact it is one of the few stories from Christ's life that is found in close to identical form in all four Gospels. And, like most biblical stories, the physical setting and geography is important.

Jerusalem, even in Jesus' time, was an ancient city believed to have been occupied before the arrival of the Hebrew people by the Jebusites. The City had been known as Salem, the home of Melchizedek according to Genesis 14.

Jerusalem was built on a group of hills, or mountains depending on your perspective, located between two valleys. If you stand south of Jerusalem facing North, the city would be in front of you. On your left or the West side of the city is Mt. Zion, where the kings built their palaces. To your right, on the East side, is Mount Moriah, the location of the Temple. Today it is known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Dome of the Rock.

This city of hills is built in the crux of a "Y" formed by two valleys. On the West, your left side, outside of the city walls, is the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, a place, historically, of perpetually burning garbage, child sacrifice and unwanted bodies. (In scripture we know this valley as Hades, or Gehenna, or Hell). On your right, the East side of Jerusalem, is the Kidron Valley.

Across the Kidron valley, opposite the Temple Mount, is the Mount of Olives. At the base of the Mount of Olives, just opposite and below the

Temple Mount is the Garden of Gethsemane. Further east up the Mount of Olives, on its west slope, are the villages of Bethphage and Bethany. Jesus is believed to have visited Bethany on several occasions since it was the home of his friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

The walk from these villages, west toward Jerusalem and down to the Kidron Valley is a somewhat steep slope that would take a half hour or so on foot. Jesus, riding a donkey, would have passed the Garden of Gethsemane, crossed the Kidron Valley, and gone up the steeper east slope of Jerusalem, and entered the walled city through one of the gated entrances on its east side.

Near the time of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, we know from non-biblical sources, that there was another procession entering Jerusalem. This procession came from Caesarea Maritima northwest of Jerusalem, Rome's major military garrison in Israel. It was a military procession of troops and war horses, sent by Rome as a major show of force to keep order in Jerusalem during the potentially tumultuous Passover festival. This festival was an important annual Jewish festival that cause the City's population to swell about 5-fold, from 40,000 to 200,000.

From the Biblical perspective, the entry into Jerusalem of a male offspring of David, has great potential significance for a city occupied and controlled by Rome, but populated with a people whose scriptures had numerous references to a Messiah who would free them from oppression. In the popular imagination, such a triumphant entry would be made by riding on stately animals, with crowds proclaiming this descendant of David as their King and Savior, God's anointed one. In the accounts of Jesus' entry, the Gospels emphasize these messianic symbols, such as a grand, triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, riding on an animal, being proclaimed by the crowd as the Son of David who comes to save them in the name of the Lord.

But for Jesus the animal he rode was a lowly donkey, actually a colt of a donkey, hardly a magnificent war horse. Jesus entered not from a seat of power, but from an inconsequential village, Bethpage, and had apparently made the arrangements for the donkey himself. Jesus was acclaimed not by the high and mighty of the City with a welcoming delegation, but by the ordinary folk bearing the brunt of the oppressive government of Rome. They shouted "Hosanna", the Aramaic form of a Hebrew word meaning "save us", Hosanna to the Son of David: blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Jesus' disciples likely

started this chant and onlookers joined in. When asked who this man riding on a donkey colt was, the common people identified Jesus, not by his lineage, battle victories, or place in history as the promised Messiah, but as a mere prophet from the backwater village of Nazareth in Galilee.

The account of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on a young donkey from an unimportant village, can be viewed as a parody of the entrance of Roman and its show of imperial force designed to maintain order during the Passover. Or, perhaps, Jesus' entry was a counter demonstration, a bit of street theater, mocking the Roman power and saying that God's Messiah was something very different from the Roman understanding of imperial might. Jesus entry can also be seen as a parody of the Jewish expectation of a messiah, a great leader who would free the Jewish nation from Roman oppression and reestablish the grandeur of Israel.

As we approach Easter, it is fitting for us to ask what we expect of Jesus and what our role is in his story. Are we part of the fickle crowd cheering Jesus as Son of David, but then turning against him, a couple of days later, crying for his execution? Are we members of the establishment who recognize only status through lineage, wealth, power and place? Are we looking backward with eyes of medieval orthodoxy, for a Messiah who forgives sin with his self-sacrifice?

Or, are we captivated by what Jesus did and said, God's Messiah, who healed the sick, the lame and the mentally ill; who enabled the blind to see, who preached welcome and care for the alien, the stranger, the neighbor, as well as hope for the poor and oppressed; ate with tax collectors, sinners and prostitutes; engaged in conversations with women?

Do we claim Jesus as the Messiah who demands our allegiance in every part of our life? How will we join Jesus in his entry to Jerusalem, and participate in Jesus as we live our lives of service to others?

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