

The Politics of the Procession of the Palms: Matthew 21:1-11

Bishop Sandy, in his homily last Sunday, said that our politics should grow out of our religious faith. I almost shouted out "Amen! - May it ever be so!"

This morning I want to talk about the Procession of the Palms, Jesus' bizarre entry into Jerusalem just before the Passover, and its political meaning.

We might see the Procession of the Palms as a quaint Sunday School story, an almost comical account of Jesus riding astride two small animals, a donkey and a colt, while the fickle Israelites shouted encouraging words, words we know they will soon repudiate. Or, we might hear this story as an affirmation of Jesus as the promised Messiah, the triumphant promised king entering, in a somewhat unusual manner, the holy city of Jerusalem. But read in its historical setting, there is another important understanding of the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem that adds both depth and relevance.

By the year 30 CE, when our gospel story took place, Judea and its capital Jerusalem had been under the absolute control of Rome for 90 years. Rome collected the taxes and appointed the governors, the religious leaders and the temple priests and the king.

Notwithstanding Rome's power, ruling Judea was a delicate balancing act. Rome wanted obedience, but not an uprising. So it had appointed a recent convert to Judaism, the Herod we know as Herod the Great, as their king, and Roman collaborators as temple priests, priests who knew their next breath, and their ability to extort money from the masses, was dependent upon the might of Rome. When Herod the Great died a short time before Christ's birth, one of his incompetent sons was appointed to take his place.

The Israelites hated life under this foreign, heathen power: the political oppression, the economic exploitation, and use of religion to legitimate the actions of the oppressor. They longed for the return of a King David-like figure, the messiah written about by the prophets, who would throw off the yoke of the foreign oppressor. Because of the Jews' hatred of Rome and dreams of a messiah, Rome always feared an uprising. And Rome knew enough about Judaism to be particularly concerned about an uprising during the Jewish celebration of the Passover, when Jerusalem's population of about 40,000 swelled to over 200,000.

Thus, Rome, each year, shortly before Passover, put on a mighty show of imperial force. A large army was marched from Caesarea Maritima, about 75 miles west on the Mediterranean Sea. In 30 CE the army was headed by Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, and included heavily armed soldiers, horses, and chariots that streamed into Jerusalem and up the temple mount to the Fortress Antonia which overlooked the Jewish Temple.

At the time of the entry of this mighty Roman force, Jesus, was known as an itinerant preacher and prophet, whose healings and miracles, preaching of forgiveness of sins apart from the money machine of the Jerusalem Temple, and proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God all appealed to the masses and frightened Rome and its Jewish minions.

Jesus, a short time before the Passover, had come with his disciples to Bethpage, on the Mount of Olives, less than a mile from Jerusalem. Picking up the

reading from the Gospel of Matthew:

"Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately. This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

*'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*

"The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

*Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

"When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'"

(That strange word "hosanna" is neither Hebrew nor Greek but Aramaic, and means "Save us.")

All of the gospel accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem suggest this was a planned, not spontaneous event. Jesus did not just see a donkey and say, "hey here's a donkey; lets take it." Jesus in Matthew's account tells his disciples to go to the adjacent village and that there they will find a donkey. This planning in advance, in the context of the annual display of military might by Rome, suggests Jesus intended to carry out, a counter demonstration as a response to the ostentatious show of empire might. Entry on a donkey mocked the empire and declared that Rome's ways were not Jesus' ways.

This reading should not surprise us. Jesus' message and actions from the beginning of his ministry presented much more than a spiritual challenge for the soul. He also presented a political challenge. His examples of healing and forgiveness of sins outside the expensive and elaborate temple system was a direct challenge to the religious elite of Jerusalem and to Rome's use of religion to reinforce the state. And Jesus' message of the coming kingdom of God, a kingdom implicitly greater than the Roman Empire, was an even more direct political challenge.

Rome saw, and we can see, Jesus's mocking counter demonstration on entering Jerusalem as conveying the same message: Rome's power is ultimately an illusion. Anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first must be a slave to all. "For the Son of man himself came not to be served but to serve."

The values of the Kingdom of God turn upside down the values of Rome, just as riding into Jerusalem on a donkey with the common people waving branches and

shouting "save us, save us" is the opposite of an army of imperial might.

The earliest Christian church reflected the reversal of values demonstrated by Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. When the plague in the second century struck the cities of the Roman world, almost everyone who could, fled from the cities leaving the sick and poor to fend for themselves. But the Christians stayed, and ministered to the ill and hungry, a fact commented on with wonder by some of the historians of the time. Care for the sick and the aliens has been a practice of the Christian church for much of its history, and an imperative in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament.

Thus, it is a great puzzle to me that the United States, (which many are so insistent is a Christian Country, God's City on the Hill) is having this seemingly endless debate about whether we should have a universal health care system.

It is not that our health care system is so good. Study after study has shown that among the developed countries, the United States spends more per person for health care than any other country, but ranks last in terms of health outcome — quality, efficiency, access to care, equity and the ability to lead long, healthy, productive lives. In fact many of the less developed countries, including some in Africa, have better health care than we do. And polls of satisfaction with our system show that before the Affordable Care Act, fewer than half were happy with their health care.

If you listen closely, the interminable criticisms of the Affordable Care Act have nothing to do with improving health care. There have been no suggestions on how we should amend the act to improve it or to make it better in delivering health care to the middle class, much less for the poor. Rather, the focus has unrelentingly been on repealing the act and cutting back on Medicare and Medicaid. The debate is really about whether our government should provide healthcare for everyone, or let everyone fend for themselves.

For a nation that claims to be Christian, Jesus' reversal of values has seemingly had no impact on our nation's care for the poor and marginalized. As a nation, rather than helping the poor and marginalized as the early Christians did so courageously, we endlessly complain about taxes and Medicaid and proclaim a desire to help the middle class, all the while cutting back programs for the poor, and deporting those with no resources who have come to work at jobs we will not do.

Is there any justice in our land?

Is anyone listening to the cries of "hosanna, hosanna", save us, save us?

Our faith community may do good work locally, but we cannot ignore national policies that are contrary to the values and teaching of the one we call Lord.

In this final week of Lent, let us together confess and seek forgiveness for the sins of commission and omission done on our behalf.

Amen.

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April 13, 2014 Palm Sunday, Year A