

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Scott Kenefake, Interim Senior Pastor
"The Last Week"
Palm Sunday
March 25, 2018

Introduction

Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year.

One was a **peasant procession**, the other an **imperial procession**. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus's crucifixion.

Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both **Roman Imperial power**—imagine cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, and the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirl of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful--and **Roman Imperial Theology**—they called Caesar (in this case Tiberius) "son of God," "lord," and "savior." Inscriptions refer to him as ... one who had brought "peace on earth."

Though unfamiliar to most people today, the imperial procession was well known in the Jewish homeland in the first century ..., for it was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals. They did so *not* out of empathetic reverence for the religious devotion of their Jewish subjects, but to be in the city in case there was trouble. There often was, especially at Passover, a festival that celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire—Egypt.

Back to the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem in the east. Although it is familiar, it has surprises. As Mark tells the story, it is a prearranged "**counter-procession**." Jesus planned it in advance. As Jesus approaches the city from the east ... he tells two of his disciples to go to the next village and get him a colt they will find there, one that has never been ridden, that is, a young one. They do so, and Jesus rides the colt down the Mount of Olives to the city surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic followers and sympathizers, who spread their cloaks, strew leafy branches on the road, and shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

As one of my Seminary Professors said more than 30 years ago, "*this looks like a planned political demonstration!*"

The meaning of the demonstration is clear, for it uses symbolism from the prophet Zechariah in the Jewish Bible. According to Zechariah, a king would be coming to Jerusalem "*humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey*" (9:9). And the rest of the Zechariah passage details what *kind* of king he will be:

“He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut-off, and he shall command peace to the nations.” (9:10)

This king, riding on a donkey, will banish war from the land—no more chariots, war-horses, or bows. Commanding peace to the nations, he will be a king of *peace*.

Jesus’s procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate’s procession embodied the *power, glory, and violence* of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus’s procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God—what the world would be like if God were king instead of Caesar.

And the confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through *the last week* of Jesus’s life. As we all know, the week ends with Jesus’s execution by the powers who ruled his world—the Romans and a small number of high ranking temple authorities (appointed by and thus owing their positions to Roman authority) collaborated in Jesus’s arrest and condemnation—not the Jewish people writ large. Holy Week is the story of that confrontation.¹

Prayer of Illumination

- Merciful God, as we enter Holy week turn our hearts again to Jerusalem, and to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Stir up within us the gift of faith that we may not only praise him with our lips, but may follow him in the way of the cross. Amen

Readers--8:30 am—The Passion Story (Matthew, Mark, & Luke)—Selected Readings

Narrator—Pat Butt
Jesus—Nancy Siljander

Paula Palmer, Ann Brindisi, & Kathy Tyson (Judas, Peter, & Priest); Caroline Yarbrough—Disciples, Soldiers

9:45 am—The Passion According to Mark

Readers—11:00 am—The Passion Story (Matthew, Mark, & Luke)—Selected Readings

Narrator: Heather McKee
Jesus: Alan England

Sarah Henry, Grace Woodward & Peggy Kimbirl (Judas, Peter, & Priest); John Crawford—Disciples, Soldiers

The Meditation—“The Last Week”

The end of Jesus’s life—his death on *the cross*—has been central to Christianity from the beginning. All four gospels devote a large portion of their narratives—about a third in Mark and more than a fourth in the others—to the last week of Jesus’s life, climaxing in his execution by the authorities and then his vindication/resurrection by God.

¹ Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *“The Last Week,”* Harper, San Francisco, 2006, pp. 2, 3, 4, & 5

So also in Paul, the cross (and not simply that Jesus died) is central. One of his shorthand crystallizations of the gospel is "*Christ crucified.*"

But ask yourself, *Why* was Jesus crucified?

We've already talked about the politically *super-charged symbolism* of Palm Sunday—and two weeks ago we reflected on another provocative public demonstration, this time in the court of the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers—what Jesus did indicted the temple for having become in his time the center of religious collaboration with imperial oppression.

For the authorities, these two public acts were the *tipping point*—he had become a public critic of the authorities and the way they had put the world together. Jesus was proclaiming a kingdom, a way of life on earth that challenged and countered their kingdom of exploitation and violence. And he had a following. So they decided he must be killed.

By executing him, the powers that ruled his world said "*no*" to what he was doing. They rejected his passion for God and the kingdom of God.

But to give you a little preview for next Sunday's sermon on Easter—and the Resurrection--it is God's "*yes*" to Jesus and his passion for the kingdom of God and God's "*no*" to the powers that killed him. That's the *first* meaning of Jesus's death.

And here's the *second*: it's about *personal transformation*.

You see, the cycle of death and resurrection, dying and rising, is a classic archetype of personal transformation.

In fact, the *archetype of dying and rising* speaks of transformation *so radical* that it is like death and resurrection—dying to an old way of being and being raised, reborn, into a new way of being.

So it is in the gospels: following Jesus on his way, his path, meant not only following him to Jerusalem and confrontation with the authorities. It also meant following him on the way to death and resurrection as the path of personal transformation.

A wonderful example of this is found in the life of Paul. For Paul, the gospel of "*Christ crucified*" not only involved opposition to the way things are, but his *personal* transformation. He said about himself:

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19-20).

The old Paul had died, and new Paul had been born whose life was now "*in Christ,*" to use one of his most frequent phrases.

So also he referred to other followers of Jesus as having died and risen with Christ. Indeed, this metaphor was the foundation of Christian identity, carrying the same meaning as John's language of being "*born again.*"

Personal transformation, then, is about *dying to an old identity and way life* grounded in *this* world—in our concerns about ourselves and our own well-being, which are pervasively shaped by cultural conventions, whether religious or secular. That *identity* might be exalted and proud or marginalized and humiliated.

So, dying and rising (being born again) means entering into a new identity and way of being, now centered in God, in Christ, in the Spirit—terms sometimes used interchangeably in the New Testament. Whoever has his or her identity in Christ, Paul wrote, is *a new creation*. The *old* has passed away.

So the cross of Christ does matter—don't be tempted to skip over Good Friday! Properly understood it is the heart of Christianity, and it is fitting that it is that it is Christianity's central symbol.²

Friends, remember, Jesus didn't simply die—he was *killed*, and in a very specific way. Crucifixion was a Roman form of capital punishment reserved for those who defied imperial authority. And it sent a message: this is what Rome does to those who challenge imperial authority.

But as we move through Holy Week, remember also, *that in Jesus—in what he was like—we see what God is like*.

Thus, in Jesus' passion for the kingdom—a kingdom that is already present, but not yet fully realized—and his challenge to the powers at the risk of his own life, we see the depth of God's love for us.

Hold-on to that for the next week. Amen.

² Marcus J. Borg, *“Convictions,”* Harper Collins, New York, 2014, pp. 138, 141, 143, 144, 145, 146