

## TWO PROCESSIONS



Matthew 21:1 "When Jesus and his disciples had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, 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.'"

And thus, begins Palm Sunday, with Jesus riding into Jerusalem through the Damascus Gate at the east end of the city, just before the Passover, seated upon a donkey, while a large crowd of people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread palms that they had cut in the fields. And those who went ahead and who followed were shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (the typical greeting of religious pilgrims to the city of Jerusalem).

At that same time, on the opposite side of the city, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem from the west through the Joppa Gate to the Old City, at the head of a column of imperial cavalry on horses and foot soldiers marching in step, carrying golden eagles mounted on poles and banners celebrating the might of the Roman Empire, whose emperor Caesar Augustus was proclaimed in inscriptions throughout the land as "the Son of god," the "Lord," the "Savior," and the one who had brought "peace on earth." Pilate's procession proclaimed Imperial power and domination over the people, while Jesus' peasant procession proclaimed the Kingdom of God in a non-violent public political demonstration of the people. This confrontation between these two competing kingdoms, between the kingdom of God and the empire of Caesar, is the central theme not only to the Gospels, but to the whole story of Jesus and early Christianity.

Now I grew up in the 1960s watching Walter Cronkite on the nightly news. And I remember seeing the various nonviolent public political demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movement, from the Greensboro sit-ins at the lunch counter of Woolworth's, to the Freedom Riders' integrated interstate bus tour, to the march from Selma to Montgomery for voting rights met by fire hoses and German shepherds, to the Poor People's Campaign encamped on the National Mall in Washington. And I remember that most of those planned non-violent political actions ended with decisively violent reactions by the authorities.

Today's reading seems to make it clear that Jesus' 'counterprocession' to Pilate's entry into the city was pre-planned and carefully arranged. Then on Monday morning, the next day, according to Mark's Gospel, Jesus cleansed the temple by driving out the buyers and the sellers, by overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of the dove sellers, and by not allowing anyone to carry anything through the temple, simply shutting down the principal sacrificial and fiscal activities in Jerusalem. Was that just another carefully planned public political demonstration against the religious authorities, who were seen as Rome's primary local collaborators, collecting the states' taxes for them and quelling the crowds of people to keep the peace, especially as the Passover was imminent? And then on Tuesday of Holy Week,

Jesus spent all day in the large Temple Courtyard of the Gentiles, a very public setting, where he confronted the chief priests, the elders, the scribes, Sadducees, and Herodians one after another, on issues like the real meaning of the Law and the Commandments, on the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar, warning the crowd to beware of those who like to wear long robes, be greeting with respect and take the best seats at the banquet, and then finally with Jesus predicting the destruction of the Temple itself. After these events, we are told, the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people" (Mk. 14.1-2). On Wednesday of that week, Judas Iscariot, who was one of Jesus' twelve appointed disciples, went to the chief priests and agreed to 'hand over' Jesus to the authorities, who were greatly pleased and promised to give him money if he did so. So, Judas began to look for an opportunity to do so quietly.

And then on Thursday of this week, Jesus shares the Passover meal with his disciples, the religious high feast that celebrates the Jewish peoples' escape from bondage in Egypt to their Promised Land, a festival of God's greatest act of deliverance. And at supper with them, Jesus took the loaf of unleavened bread, and after blessing it he broke it, and gave it to his disciples and said, "This is my body," broken for you.

Then he took the cup of wine, and after giving thanks Jesus gave it to the disciples, and all of them drank of it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mk. 14.22-24), and then after supper Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. Is this in Jesus' mind a private political demonstration simply inviting his disciples to join with him in this new covenant, and what does that all mean? After supper Judas handed Jesus over to the high priests without incident, and Jesus' disciples then all fled and hid behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish authorities, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times in the courtyard of the High Priest, and Judas in despair hanged himself.

So then, did Jesus know how all these non-violent political demonstrations would turn out? Sure, there had been violence before in the temple, where the crowd twice tried to stone Jesus, or the authorities to arrest, so it wouldn't be surprising if Jesus expected some kind of trouble again. But did Jesus really know exactly what would happen next. For the Gospel writers tell us that on three separate occasions that week Jesus predicted his passion, where he told his disciples plainly that the Son of Man must suffer many things, that he would be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes and be rejected by them, who would condemn him to death and deliver him to the Gentiles, and that they would mock him, spit upon him, scourge

him, kill him, and after three days he would rise from the dead?  
Did Jesus really predict all this so accurately and in such  
detail? For the actions of his followers next week on Easter  
Sunday would clearly suggest to me, otherwise, and that will be  
the topic of my sermon next Sunday. Amen.