

SERMON
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Two Parades (Palm Sunday)

April 9th, 2017

Matthew 21: 1-11

In Stratford, every April just before Easter, there is the annual swan parade. Thousands of people line the streets to watch the swans leave their winter home and march their way down to the river. In fact, this year there were 5000 people last Sunday at this parade. At the front of the parade is the Stratford Police Bagpipe band, loudly announcing the arrival of the swans. And all the way along the 500-meter waddle, the swans are cheered on by happy and enthusiastic crowds. Some people wear swan hats, some wave flags. Everyone is clapping and cheering. All are eager to watch the swans reach the water, spread out their magnificent wings, and announce their return to life in Stratford again. It truly is an event not to be missed.

There's a strong similarity to the swan march and Palm Sunday. Both are celebrated every year, around about the same time. Both have a sense of ceremony. Both have cheering crowds lining the streets. In one people wave flags, and in the other they wave palm branches. In one they clap and in the other they shout "Hosanna." Both are filled with enthusiasm and hope. And just as the swans are filled with excitement, we too are filled with joy as we remember the excitement of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. You could see the excitement in our own palm parade here at Knox.

There is also something comical about watching the swans waddle down the street led by a pipe band. They seem the most unlikely stars of attention for the crowds. And I think that was the same for Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. Verse 5 tells us that his entry was fulfilling Hebrew testament prophecy that tells us that he was "coming as a King". But Jesus does not enter with all the pomp and circumstance of a royal parade. Instead, Jesus comically straddled a donkey, sitting on someone's old cloak under him. The reaction of the crowds was probably laughter amidst their joy. The crowds would have known about the pompous ceremonial entry of Pilate at the Damascus Gate. The Jewish Feast days were beginning and Pilate, with his troops in full amour – was sending a message of his power and importance. While here is Jesus, the carpenter, humbly entering Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowd spread their cloaks and palms on the road in front of Jesus; this very act was an act of royal homage – something that one would do for a royal parade. It's like an improvised red carpet. In the synoptic gospels, they shout "Blessed is the king" and "Blessed is the coming kingdom." The crowd would have understood that Jesus' royal counter procession in the East Gate, was a mockery of Rome and Pilate entering in the West Gate.

But there is nothing spontaneous about this parade. Every detail of Jesus' provocative approach to the city had been very carefully planned.

To begin with, we know that Jesus usually walks everywhere on foot. He could have easily slipped into Jerusalem quietly and blended into the pedestrian pilgrims gathering for Passover. There is certainly no indication that Jesus or his disciples had any physical necessity of the animal. Instead, they chose to ride the last mile into a pedestrian filled city, making a deliberate gesture of attention. They clearly intended to be noticed.

Secondly, it is clear that Jesus had prearranged the loan of a donkey. He tells his disciples exactly where to find the donkey, and what to say to the owner.

"If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them," (Matthew 21:3)

This brief formula “The Lord needs them” is most likely an agreed password – something that has already been prearranged and quite possibly paid for. It is, after all, unlikely that any gullible villager would part with their animal to two total strangers unless he had been forewarned, and likely paid in advance.

Thirdly, the choice of the animal is no coincidence. Jesus, his disciples, and the Jewish people gathered for Passover, they all knew the Hebrew scripture of Zechariah: it tells of a prophecy that foretells of the coming of Zion’s King. Zechariah 9:9 says:

*Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

When Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey, he knew that the people would recognize this gesture as the coming of the Messiah, and the fulfillment of the Holy Scriptures.

And fourthly, the very type of animal – a donkey – it is a symbol of humility and peace. Pilate at the West Gate was undoubtedly entering in a chariot with war horses. But Jesus chooses to follow the model of an old testament oracle. Zechariah describes the Messiah king as:

- he is victorious, yet meek;
- his triumph is received rather than won;
- he rides a donkey rather than a warhorse;
- and his kingdom will be one of peace rather than coercion.

Now, doesn’t that sound like Jesus?

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, as Messiah and King, deliberately subverts any popular militaristic idea of kingship. Jesus’ life and teachings had repeatedly spoken of a type of leadership which is completely opposed to the world’s notions of kingship and authority. And now, he models his teachings in the meekness of his royal procession to the city. His procession deliberately counters 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’ procession embodied an alternative vision; the vision of the kingdom of God. We could hear the contrast of the two parades from our two trusty reporters.

And for us, gathered here today at the beginning of Holy Week, as we journey into Jerusalem, into Holy Week, we must decide which procession we are in. Over 2000 years later, we still live in a world where power and injustice dominate. The recent gruesome and tragic attacks in Syria, prove that our world is still full of hatred and revenge; it shows that like Rome and Pilate, our world is still run on militaristic principles of power. Is this the parade that you support? Or are you willing to wave your palm branch and stand in the procession to cheer for Jesus – the Messiah, the King of Peace. Are you willing to speak out against injustice, and to stand up for God’s vision of a reign of peace? And if you do cheer for Jesus, is your commitment strong enough to keep cheering in the face of power. Will you speak out truth against power in our world today?

Two parades entered Jerusalem on that day. The same question, the same alternative, faces those who would be faithful to Jesus today. Which parade are you in? Which parade do you want to be in? This is the question of Palm Sunday, and the week that is about to unfold.