

Palm Sunday A April 05 2020
Matthew 21:1-11
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace beloved Saints from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

This morning we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It's Palm Sunday! *"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"* And yet, I'm curious about what Matthew writes immediately following: *When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil* (Matthew 21:10). Let's pray:

When he [Jesus] entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil. What's that about? Why is Jerusalem in turmoil over Jesus' entrance? Shouldn't they be celebrating? What the citizens of Jerusalem are aware of that we're probably not, is what's happening on the other side of the city at the same time as our focus is fixed on Jesus' palm laden procession. Jerusalem knows that there is a lot more going on than just Jesus coming to town. His entrance into Jerusalem will set up a confrontation, a show down, a clash of two very different kingdoms.

Jesus' procession isn't the only one entering Jerusalem about this time. Jesus is approaching Jerusalem from the east. On the opposite side of the city, Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, is approaching from the west. It is standard practice for the Roman governor and his troops to come to Jerusalem for major Jewish feasts like the Passover, not out of respect for the religious practices of the Jews, but to be in Jerusalem to put a lid on any trouble and quell any potential uprising.

In light of this information, I'd like you to reboot your thoughts about Palm Sunday and consider another approach. I'd like you to think of Jesus' Palm Sunday procession as a protest march. I'd like you to think of the Palm Sunday procession as a swelling resistance movement. To do so, serves to highlight the struggle that takes place in every human heart – the will for power verses the will for life. I believe that's exactly what's happening today. Palm Sunday, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, sets up a confrontation and it has the whole city in turmoil.

St Matthew's telling of the story portrays that Jesus intends his entry into Jerusalem to make a statement. Jesus has already taken care of the details. This isn't by chance or luck. Jesus has a plan. He sends two disciples to bring him a particular donkey and her colt that are tied and waiting at a particular location. *"If anyone says anything to you,"* he tells the disciples, *"just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately"* (Matthew 21:3). It sounds a lot like Jesus has made meticulous travel arrangements ahead of time.

Jesus' Palm Sunday procession is a demonstration countering Pilate's procession, and the contrast is stark. Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem. Pontius Pilate rides a war horse leading a column of cavalry. One is a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. One comes with followers, the other with soldiers. One throws down cloaks and branches, the other carries weapons and armour. One demonstrates political protest, the other political power. One is unarmed and nonviolent, the other armed and ready for violence. One wills life, the other power.

[An image that comes to my mind is the man standing in front of a column of tanks during the Tiananmen Square protest in Beijing, China, June 5th 1989.]

“Tank Man” (Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons, Fair Use)



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“Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Matthew 21:5). St Matthew quotes from the prophecy of Zechariah [9:9] to make sure we understand what kind of king Jesus is. Zechariah’s prophecy goes on to describe this king as one commanding peace to the nations. There will be no more chariots, war-horses, or battle bows (Zechariah 9:10). Jesus is the king of peace, standing in stark contrast to the pride, arrogance, power, oppression, glory, and violence of the Roman empire that rules the world that Jesus came to save. It is as true today as it was then.

Two completely different visions for life and the world are entering Jerusalem – the Kingdom of Heaven and the kingdom of Caesar. That is the central conflict of Holy Week.

How far do you reckon we've come since that first Holy Week? Is today's world any different? In many ways, there are things that are better. In other ways, there are things that are worse. What remains the same is the battle between the will for power and the will for life. That's the struggle we must wrestle with today and throughout this Holy Week. Jesus does, and so must we as his disciples.

Think about times when you've experienced the will for power taking the upper hand in yourself or in others. The will for power can show up anywhere: in our family of origin, our marriage, our church, our school, our workplace, our country. What's it like? What do you see? How does it feel? Who had the power and what did he or she do with it? How do you get power? The will for power is as old as Cain and Abel, most forcibly; Adam and Eve, more subtly. It's a part of human nature; the condition we call sin, and it infects and affects you and me.

I demonstrate my own will for power by using passive aggressive behaviour. I show my opposition to things by not doing things people want or expect me to do. A silent, non-violent protest, but the results are no less damaging in the end. I stubbornly dig my heels in by doing and responding to nothing and no one. When I exert a will for power, I don't do what others want me to do. I don't speak when asked for a response. It puts others on edge and creates an undefinable hardness for those around me and my relationships. I need to be right and have to have the final word, usually unspoken. I must be the centre of my world.

Maybe some of that sounds familiar to you. Maybe you exert your will for power in different ways. Think about how you might express it in your thoughts, words, or actions.

And what about the will for life? Where and when have you seen that arise? What effect did it have? How did it feel? Whose faces do you see when you think of the will for life? How has his or her will for life changed your life? The will for life is as old and sacred as that first breath God breathed into Adam's nostrils.

When I get over myself and have the will for life, the world seems larger and more beautiful. I open up, am vulnerable, and receptive. My relationships are more intimate, I participate, reciprocate, and show gratitude. I am inspired, I get excited, and I engage more deeply. My mind is open and willing to receive, learn, and change. My heart softens and opens. I am willing to love, forgive, and risk being broken. The will for life allows me to see the fragility of people and relationships. It invites self-giving, self-sacrifice, self-surrender. Concern for the dignity and well-being of others comes to the forefront. God feels close, tangible, and identifiable in ordinary things. I no longer need to be in control. Life is not about me.

Maybe some of that describes your experience of the will for life. There's so much more that could be said. Think about what you would add. Think about how you experience and express the will for life.

Two processions enter Jerusalem, and the whole city is in turmoil. However, the turmoil of Palm Sunday is not limited to Jerusalem. The will for power and the will for life process throughout our world, our nation, our lives every day. Wherever they clash there is turmoil. Maybe we need that turmoil to shake and awaken us, to dislodge us from complacency and ungratefulness.

This side of eternity, the will for power and the will for life will remain in a constant tug-o-war. That's why Jesus came down from heaven and emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, serving everyone by becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7-8).

In his humility, Christ came into our fallen world and gladly humbled himself for our sake, gladly came and lived among us and shared in our nature in order to raise us up again to himself. His love for us will never rest until he has raised our earthly nature from glory to glory, and made it one with his own in heaven.

So, let's remove the branches laid at his feet, and lay ourselves before him, clothed in his grace. Let us who are baptised into Christ be the garments that are spread before him. We've been washed clean by the saving waters of baptism and we have become white as pure wool. Let's present Jesus, the conqueror of death, with the real rewards of his victory. Let our souls take the place of the branches. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is Jesus, the king of heaven and earth. Every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.