

Triumphal Entry? I don't think so...

Have you ever ridden a donkey? Stubborn, aren't they? They go where they want, when they want, at the speed they want. Kind of like a toddler. But firrier.

Now, please understand. The "Church" has, for years, smushed Palm Sunday and Good Friday together. With a title like "Passion Sunday with the Liturgy of the Palms. Yikes.

I am a liturgical snob. I admit that. I hold myself to a very high standard in how I govern myself, be it at Church, when I preach, or conduct myself when I'm out and about. I disagree with the notion that the faithful wouldn't be able to give the time to attend Palm Sunday and a separate Passion Service.

Passion Sunday refers to the Passion of Christ, or what has come to be known as Good Friday. It really doesn't have anything to do with Palm Sunday or Jesus "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem. They are two separate events, they happen on two different days.

I'm not a fan of two-for-one, especially when it comes to worship. Passion Sunday with the Liturgy of the Palms gives one Liturgical Whiplash. Which is why I separate them into two distinct services, each with merit in their own right. To go from Palm Sunday to Good Friday makes no sense. There are five days in between.

Wait? Where was I? Right, Palm Sunday.

So, donkeys. Known as beasts of burden...not majestic. Not regal. Not associated with wealth or status. When I think of a "triumphant entry" I imagine chariots and chariot drivers. I imagine royal purple bunting strewn about. The crowd will be waving flags for the Emperor. Not weeds from the ditch.

You see, Jesus knew that Tiberius Caesar, the Emperor, was coming to Jerusalem from Rome for the Feast of the Passover. Jesus, at this stage in his ministry, knew that he was a "wanted" man. Pilate was part of the parade, as was Caiaphas.

They entered from the West Gates of Jerusalem with great pomp and pageantry. Trumpets, chariots, chariot drivers, lots of majesty. LOTS of majesty. Shouts from the crowd, cheering for Tiberius, Pilate and Caiaphas. Egos swelling as they watch the rich and powerful gather to greet them, and especially Tiberius, the King of the Jews. A title assumed by Tiberius' Stepfather Caesar Augustus, which was then passed down to and assumed by Tiberius upon Augustus's death.

Now, contrast that with Jesus entry into Jerusalem. His followers don't have money. They don't have horses and chariots. Jesus knew that Tiberius would be coming in by the West Gates. He would be surrounded by pomp and pageantry. Jesus himself entered through the East Gates. Where the dregs of society lived. No horses or royal purple.

No banners or flags to wave. Jesus followers are not rich and powerful. They are poor, working-class, downtrodden workers ground under the heels of Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas. Yet they know that Jesus IS the King of the Jews. That he is God's own son. The rightful King of the Jews, as his birthright, **not** an assumed title. Tiberius governed by brute force and fear. Jesus lead by political and spiritual example. To love God above others and to love your neighbour as yourself. Sound familiar?

The Gospel of Matthew tells his disciples to go ahead of him and look for a donkey and a colt. Not one donkey, as we hear in Mark and Luke. A donkey and her colt. This was to prove the foreshadowing of the scripture. "Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Now, let's try to get an image of this...a grown man, riding on not one, but two donkeys, one of which is a baby donkey. How would he do that? Would he straddle both? No, not likely. Sidesaddle on both? No, not likely. How about sidesaddle on one, and lay across the other? Regardless of how he actually did it, it would have looked somewhat silly. Certainly not the least bit majestic.

Entering the West gates: pageantry, royal purple, flags and banners.  
Entering the East gates: excitement, humble cloaks and ditch-weeds.

Did you know that every donkey carries the sign of the cross? If you look at them from above; from the mane to the tail and from shoulder to shoulder their fur is a darker colour. In the shape of a cross. Coincidence? Naw, no such thing as coincidence.

The disciples carried palm fronds. We spend a lot of money to import palms from Africa or from the Middle East. In Jesus' day these palm fronds were readily available. They grew on the side of the road like weeds and cost nothing to wave. Today, they cost a lot to wave. So why do we continue to do so?

If we are following in the "intention" of Jesus with the palms, we should be waving something that is readily available and free of charge. Which is why I suggested cedar. Now, I know not everyone has a cedar bush on their front lawn, but there are several around Fernie. I took mine from the bush in front of my apartment building.

The faithful are gathering at the East gates to welcome Jesus. They hold their palm fronds (read ditch-weeds) in the air and shouting Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!

What does Hosanna mean? It means "save us". When the crowds were waving ditch-weeds and yelling Hosanna! Hosanna in the Highest! They were really saying "save us now, Oh King of the Jews". Save us from what, you might ask.

Save us from Tiberius, and Pilate and Caiaphas. Because you see, crucifixion was used for two purposes. Blood-sport, entertainment and to rule by abject terror. If you break the law you will be nailed to a tree and left to die, painfully, over many days. This was typical Roman rule. Iron fist. Strike fear into the hearts of the less-fortunate.

Living in a perpetual state of fear dulls the mind. We are seeing this happening in our communities today. With COVID-19 we are not allowed to gather in groups. When we do see groups we grow fearful of contagion. Pandemic is a word that strikes great fear. How do you

contract the virus? How long does it live on hard surfaces? What happens if I contract it? It's not healthy to sustain that kind of fear for an extended period of time.

Jesus followers had heard of this itinerant preacher; a nobody from nowhere who had something different to say from the majority of preachers in the town square. Not once did he ever claim to be the Son of God. He pushed against the ruling classes that felt wealth and power were the keys to the kingdom of God. Jesus talked about the importance of love, of relationship, of caring for the elderly and infirm; the widows and orphans.

Tiberius didn't know or care about any of this. The poor were a workforce for him and the empire. Heavily taxed, overworked, living in constant fear. And then along comes Jesus, promising a new life. A new way. It all sounded too good to be true...

And so they came out in force to welcome him into the city. Not with banners, but with weeds. Not with bunting, but with cloaks. Not with awe, but with shouts of praise and fear. Hosanna! HELP US! Hosanna! SAVE US! Hosanna in the highest! Save us now from this horror in which we are living.

Now, of course the Emperor's cortege arrived at the centre of town much earlier than Jesus did. The Emperor's parade was mostly on horseback or in a chariot. Jesus cortege was on foot. Yet they were most joyous. They hoped, beyond all hope, that Jesus had come to free them from their wretched existence and bring them the kingdom of God, bring them to an earthly kingdom of God.

Please understand, the crowds from Palm Sunday and Good Friday are completely different. Jesus followers did not turn on him. They either fled in abject terror or they watched in tremendous distress. More on that as the week unfolds...

Jesus Triumphant Entry was actually a political protest. A sort of "Occupy Jerusalem" if you will. Jesus was to take on the establishment and show them that love cannot be broken. Love cannot be defeated. Darkness will never overcome light completely.

Not as long as there is love in the world.

And so, my friends, as we continue to move through this strange new world, remember to breathe deeply. To wash your hands for at least twenty seconds. To pray for at least twenty seconds. To care for your neighbour in whatever safe way you can, be it hearts on the window for them to see as they walk by, a phone call to say "I'm thinking of and praying for you" or honking as you see a sign for a 7 year old celebrating his birthday without birthday party, yet with a sign inviting folks to honk to cheer him.

We will come through this time stronger than before. Our priorities are being challenged and with any luck, many of them will change. We too, will be about relationships and protecting those close to us. We will follow the rules of physical isolation while finding new and creative ways to stay in touch.

Remember, you are loved today, more than yesterday. But not as much as you'll be loved tomorrow. Share that love with everyone.

Amen!

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Palm Sunday            Matthew 21.1-11