

Church of the Crossroads
Palm/Passion Sunday
April 9, 2006
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HOMILY

Mark 11:1-11

Mark's account of the so-called "triumphal" entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is not only filled with irony, it is also misnamed. Neither was the procession clearly "triumphal", nor did it enter into Jerusalem. It is only after the procession that Jesus entered the city.

The episode resembles "carefully choreographed street theater," writes Chad Myers describes in his commentary on the Gospel of Mark. The story is designed to give intentionally conflicting signals. It sets up a contrast between two interpretations, and as it turns out, only one interpretation will prove to be true. In the meanwhile, we, the observers of the scene, are caught up in the irony of it all.

On the one hand, the procession could be seen in light of a military procession of a triumphal nationalist hero, as when the triumphal rebel Simon Maccabaeus entered into Jerusalem 160 years earlier "with praise and palm branches and with hymns and psalms." (1Mc 13:51)

Mark, in keeping with the spirit of this kind of triumphal entry has the march of Jesus begin near "the Mount of Olives." In apocalyptic tradition, the final battle against the enemies of Israel in defense of Jerusalem was associated with the Mount of Olives. In Zechariah we read,

I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered . . . Then will Yahweh go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives.

- Zechariah 14:2-4

Is Mark, then, implying that Jesus is going forth to battle? Or, is the message quite different?

There is nothing spontaneous about this march. It is carefully planned, much like street theatre. Over half of the story involves the procurement not of a great horse, but a lowly ass. Here, Mark seems to be pointing to quite a different tradition from the prophet Zechariah, that of the Messiah who comes into Jerusalem, not in triumph, not upon a mighty steed, but in peace, “meek, riding upon an ass.”

So we have two possibilities, the first the march of a hero bent upon a violent battle against the enemies of Israel and the second, the procession of an antimilitary, non-violent, humble, servant Messiah. The goal of the first kind of entry into Jerusalem would be the establishment of a Jewish state centered in the temple. It would mean that the conquering hero would enter the temple, therefore, in triumph to the acclaim of all. The goal of the second kind of entry into Jerusalem is unknown. In hindsight we know that it led not to an enthronement or the establishment of a temple state. No, it led to a cross. At the end of our story we get a hint. After the procession, Jesus does enter Jerusalem, and goes into the temple. And what does he do? He just looks around and leaves. There is no triumphal entry here.

The scene of the march of Jesus to the outskirts of Jerusalem is, in itself, ambiguous, and filled with irony. At first glance, we can see it both ways. We can easily get it wrong. Even the shout “hosanna” is ambiguous. In ancient Jewish tradition it was used to address kings as in an acclamation, such as “hail to the chief.” But it was also used as a cry for help. Literally, “hosanna” means “help us.” So even the word “hosanna” itself has a double meaning.

Of course, we know what happened eventually. The second interpretation proved to be the accurate one. And so, my friends, what we have on our hands still is a suffering Messiah, a servant Messiah, a lowly, non-violent messiah who journeys towards a cross.

This is the One who is to be found, we trust, at the center of our life together in this community of faith. Such a Messiah puts us at odds with the world surrounding us, with the prizes and glories sought after by our society, and surely with the war-making of our nation. This should not come to us as a surprise, given the story that is at the very heart of the Christian movement.

For now, though, knowing what is in store for Jesus, let us leave this particular story behind, and journey with him to the cross. We will recall that journey today in this service, and as we gather here in this place on Thursday and Friday. Only then, will we be ready on Saturday evening and Sunday morning to raise our voices in praise to the God who grants newness of life. May God's grace be upon us during these days of remembrance as we journey through the darkness towards Easter's joy. Amen.