

PALM PASSION SUNDAY, YEAR A, APRIL 2, 2023

On that first Palm Sunday there were two triumphal entry processions that entered Jerusalem. Every year, the Roman governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem to be present in the city for Passover. The governor would come in all of his imposing majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome was in charge. Pontius Pilate's royal procession was a visual display of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, with the sun glinting on metal and gold as they entered from the west gate of Jerusalem.

It's important to remember that according to Roman imperial belief, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome; he was the Son of God. For the empire's Jewish subjects, Pilate's procession signaled more than a military threat. It was the embodiment of a rival theology.

Jesus, on the other hand entered the east gate in contrast riding on the most unthreatening, most unmilitary mount imaginable – a donkey. His procession included a rag tag group of people - the powerless and the explicitly vulnerable. They threw palm branches and shouted Hosanna. But did anyone in the crowd that day understand what Jesus was doing? Did they get that his Way, was a new and uncharted one? A risky one? Did they hear who he was in contrast to Pilate?

I suspect they did not. After all, they were ripe for revolution. They wanted and expected something world-altering. Their fervor and shouts of hosanna were to save them from Rome. What they got was a mismatch between their outsized expectations and God's answer.

I think this is why at the end of our first gospel reading they ask, “who is this?” It's not just a question, the people that day asked but it's a question we all ask. Who is this Jesus? Who is he in my life? Does his life, behavior and teachings influence my life? Does he have any impact on my beliefs, morals, ethics and how I live my life? We also have a tendency to domesticate Jesus and keep him as the sweet baby Jesus instead of someone who challenges every one of our beliefs, who, if we truly follow him, turns our lives upside down.

The religious and political authorities saw Jesus was a threat. For that matter, he still is. He threatens our penchant to define ourselves over and against others. He threatens the way in which we seek to establish our future by hoarding wealth and power. He threatens our habit of drawing lines and making rules about who is acceptable and who is not. He continues to threaten our reliance on anything – our wealth, position, political identity, good works, relationships or anything other than God's mercy. He threatens all of these things and more. When we defy his teachings and his way of life, we are crucifying him all over again.

What's hard about this message is that we all have come at times to seek our identity and secure our future on things other than God. The blessing of Palm/Passion Sunday is that none of these other things are up to the job as only God can declare us as not just acceptable but as blessed and beloved. Jesus' journey to the cross shows us just how far he was willing to go to demonstrate to us God's unconditional love and acceptance. And once you hear that message of grace, mercy, and love, then it's time to stop crucifying Jesus and realize our shouts should be hosanna, save us, from our

dependency on other things, ourselves and others and look to him with all the joy and hope we can muster. Amen.