

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Palm/Passion Sunday
St. Mark 11:1-11

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

It had been a long 100 mile walk from Galilee. Often they would cross to the other side of the Jordan to avoid the hated Sumerians. Usually groups of travelers from nearby villages would meet up in order to travel together. It added an element of protection from the robbers who preyed on the country bumpkins going to the big city for the festival. And, of course, there were various taxes to pay along the way. They were set by Rome to pay what Rome required, but the tax collectors added their share and whatever more they thought they could get away with—they were robbers of a slightly different kind. But eventually they arrived in time.

It was the spring of 30 AD. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. Two processions entered Jerusalem that year. One was a peasant procession. The country bumpkins may not even have know Jesus was among them. Coming from the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives cheered by His followers. His message was about the kingdom of God, and His followers came from the peasant class. They then climbed to the Temple Mount—a great structure of tremendous beauty—the symbol of religious authority and the location of God on earth. Right next to the Temple stood the Roman Antonio Fortress—also impressive and just a little higher than the Temple so everyone would know who was really in charge. If the Temple could stir your religious emotions, the fortress, with its garrison of Roman soldiers could let the air out of your enthusiasm and give you a heavy dose of reality. But they were there to celebrate—celebrate their ancient liberation from Egyptian slavery. “Hosanna,” they cried—Save us. It was a parade of the little people—bumpkins, fishermen, labors as well as the blind and the lame who had been healed. Borrowing the colt added a little fuel to the celebration, making it a demonstration. The story of the colt is taken from the prophet Zechariah in the Hebrew Bible, which makes the meaning of this demonstration clear. “According to Zechariah, a king would be coming to Jerusalem ‘humble, and riding on a cold, the foal of a donkey (9:9)’” The rest of the Zechariah’s prophecy details what *kind* of king he will be. “This king, riding on a donkey, will banish war from the land—no more chariots,

war-horses, or bows. Commanding peace to the nations, he will be a king of peace.”¹

On the other side of town, from the west, came an imperial procession. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. It was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals. They did not do it to join in the celebration or any empathetic reverence for the religious devotion of their Jewish subjects, but to be in the city in case there was trouble. There often was, especially at Passover, a festival that celebrated the liberation from an earlier empire. Pilate and his soldiers had come from Caesarea on the Sea, 60 miles to the west, where he lived in that new and splendid city on the coast. For them it was much more pleasant than Jerusalem, which was inland and insular, provincial and partisan, and often hostile.

Jesus’s procession proclaimed the kingdom of God. Pilate’s military procession was a demonstration of Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology. It must have been quite a parade: cavalry on horses, soldiers in columns, leather armor, helmets, spears, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun reflecting off metal and gold... the steady, pounding beat of drums, marching feet, the clatter of horseshoes... the swirling of dust. I can only imagine the eyes of the silent onlookers—some curious, some awed, some resentful. I can only imagine living in a place where storm troopers marched down your street and observed your every move.

“Pilate’s procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God. It began with the greatest of the emperors, Augustus, who ruled Rome from 31 BC to 14 AD”² His successor, Tiberius, from 14 to 37 AD, bore the same title. Rome was not only a rival social order, but also represented a rival God.

Two processions arrive in the city that embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’s crucifixion. It is a powerful image, these two parades... entering from different sides of the city; one a group of bumpkins from Galilee, the little people, the powerless ones... the other the powerful,

1 *The Last Week*, Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, p. 4.

2 *Ibid*, p. 5.

the movers and shakers, the politically on top. And it was deliberate. Jesus's procession deliberately countered 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's procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God; of God's justice, of egalitarian social order where all eat at the same table—no aristocracy or peasant, no Jew no Gentile, no rich no poor, no male no female, no black or white, no slave or free; no violence.

The confrontation between two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus' life. Holy Week is the story of this confrontation that continues through us and challenges us, among all the waving palms and thundering drums, to wonder if we're at the right parade.