

Palm Sunday B: Luke 19
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Church of the Good Shepherd
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At last. Jesus has at last come to Jerusalem. For months, we have followed him through the dusty, obscure towns of Galilee. We have listened to his teaching, pondered his stories, and witnessed his healing wonders. But from the beginning Jesus has made it clear that he was headed to Jerusalem. And now Jesus has arrived. Coming from the east, from the Mount of Olives, Jesus is greeted—welcomed—with a parade, with palm branches, with cloaks thrown before him, and with shouts of acclaim. Jesus had said that “a prophet cannot be killed outside of Jerusalem,” but he’s welcomed in the Holy City not as a prophet but as a king.

Indeed, the whole scene is rich with royal overtones. The people threw their coats before Jesus, just as Israelites had done before when Jehu was anointed in the book of 2 Kings. They waved palms now just like they did for the famous Judas Maccabeus 200 years before when he arrived in Jerusalem after conquering the pagan armies that oppressed Israel. Moreover, Jesus came riding on the donkey, which may seem like a strange detail, but it was the fulfillment of prophecy. Five hundred years before, the prophet Zechariah spoke of the coming of a messianic king: “Behold,” he said, “your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” And if that wasn’t clear enough, the crowd explicitly called Jesus king: “Blessed is the king who has come in the name of the Lord!” Even Jesus’ critics, the Pharisees, understood what Jesus was doing, complaining as they did that the disciples were causing a scene, stirring up trouble with the Romans. “Tell your followers to not be so loud,” they pleaded. For followers and critics alike, Jesus’ triumphal procession was a clear declaration of royal power. Jesus was king and he had come to liberate his people.

And yet Jesus’ was not the only procession in Jerusalem at the start of Passover week. On the other side of the city, another conqueror was making his way into Jerusalem. Out of fear of rioting, each year at Passover, Pilate, the Roman governor, came up to Jerusalem from Caesarea, the imperial capital to the west of the city. He was accompanied by the imperial cavalry and soldiers come to strengthen the Roman garrison in Jerusalem. His arrival was signaled by arms clattering, swords glinting in the sun, the thunder of hooves and chariots meant to intimidate, to quell any thought of an uprising with the huge crowds visiting the Holy City. Everybody knew what Pontius Pilate’s entry into Jerusalem meant—Rome is in charge, and you had better not mess with Roman power or there will be hell to pay.

So you have Pilate’s imperial procession, with the whole of Rome’s power on display, on one side, on one side of the city, and on the other you have Jesus and his “counter-procession.” The two couldn’t be more different. Jesus comes not on a war stallion, but on a shaggy donkey, his followers—a gaggle of assorted peasants, fishermen, prostitutes, and tax collectors—are armed not with swords but with...palm fronds!

In fact, from the outside, it almost looks as if Jesus and his followers are play-acting, making a parody of Pilate’s procession, a bunch of kids choosing one of their own to be king-for-a-day,

placing their father's bathrobe on his shoulders and enthroning him in a lawn chair. It's farcical, burlesque almost. And yet for all its seeming humor, what Jesus is doing is deadly serious. As the Pharisees point out, he's playing with fire, poking fun at the Empire. If Jesus knew what was good for him, he wouldn't let the joke go on so long. Everyone else had learned to have a healthy fear of Roman power. But Jesus is resolved to undercut it with donkeys and a parade of peasants. And you can bet Rome isn't going to take the joke lightly. So, unmatched though they are, these two "kings" are on a collision course. Pilate representing the powers-that-be, and Jesus cutting a far less intimidating figure as king. The clash is inevitable, with a showdown in the streets of Jerusalem.

Except that the conflict never happens. After marching through the city showing off Rome's power, Pilate retires to his imperial palace on the west side of the city. And Jesus' parade from the east—it just, well, dissipates. Luke, nor any of the other gospel writers, suggests that the triumphal entry goes anywhere much.

It seems that, despite the hopes, despite the fears of a showdown, of Jesus taking Roman authority head on, nothing of the sort happens. It makes one wonder, What was the point of the parade in the first place? Jesus, after his "triumphal entry," doesn't look anything much like a king anymore, let alone one that has triumphed over his enemies. He hasn't come with thousands of armed troops; he hasn't issued any ultimatum that Pilate must withdraw from the city and head back to Rome. Actually Jesus doesn't show any sign of caring much about Pilate and the Romans at all. If Jesus came to pick a fight, it isn't with Rome.

Indeed, if you look at the events in Luke that transpire between now and Jesus' crucifixion, the Romans are almost entirely absent from the account. Only at the very end does Pilate show up, to sentence Jesus to death—and that comes only after much effort by Pilate not to get involved. What consumes Jesus' final days is not conflict with Rome but clashes with the Jewish leaders—Jesus cleansing the Temple, his telling parables against the Temple priests, his shaming of the Sadducees, his warnings against Jerusalem's fall and the Temple's destruction. If Jesus came as a "conquering king," it wasn't to challenge the imperial forces, not directly, but instead to take on the Jewish leaders who had betrayed the trust given them, the bad shepherds who have led their flock astray.

So the first thing Jesus does once in Jerusalem is go to the Temple. This too was a political act, more so even than the parade. Jesus has come to Jerusalem to be acknowledged as king, the Son of David, the long-expected liberator of his people. But to have that claim upheld, he doesn't go to the imperial palace. No, he goes to the Temple. For us who think in terms of a separation between church and state, this might seem strange. But the Temple is at the center of Israel's life. It defines Israel as a people. For the Jews, worship and political obedience are inseparable, always have been. Indeed, their present predicament, their political subjugation, is inextricably tied the abuses of the Temple, part of the same political reality. So to save his people, Jesus must deal with the Temple, to cleanse it of those things that keep it from being "a house of prayer," a place where the Lord God is worshipped. Jesus sets his sights on the Temple because, as theologian Stanley Hauerwas puts it, "without true worship of God, there is no way to know what a true politics might be."

Jesus knows that it is of no use confronting the imperial forces directly. He knows that replacing one conquering king with another does us no good. One Caesar is as bad as another. What is needed is not a new ruler, but a new kind of rule, not just a new king but a new kind of kingdom—the Kingdom of God, God’s rule on earth, God dwelling among us, his peace and order spreading out throughout the world. Such a kingdom, such a rule, is only possible, Jesus understands, in the context of right worship. Only by worshipping the true God, and denying the false gods of worldly power, security, wealth, and fertility—only then can we begin to see, to conceive of a politics other than that of Caesar’s, a rule built on something other than coercion and violence, a power displayed in service, humility, forgiveness and sacrifice.

That’s why Jesus came to Jerusalem. And that is why he was killed. Because Jesus was calling the people back to God, reminding them who is in charge, who rules. This made the religious leaders afraid. “We have no king but Caesar,” they declared, “We know no rule but Rome’s.” The Temple authorities were in bed with the Empire, they were dependent on Rome for their power and position. If anyone should threaten that power, there was only one thing to do—get rid of him, show him the full force of Rome’s shock-and-awe terror campaign, simply put, crucify him.

And so it was that, when Jesus does finally come face to face with the power of Caesar, it was not in open conflict but as a result of faithless subterfuge by the Temple priests. Jesus, the embodiment of God’s gracious, forgiving rule, and Pilate, the representative of Rome’s *real politic*. The confrontation is as stark as it is swiftly resolved. A politics of service, humility and forgiveness is no match for the forces of coercion and violence. Jesus is quickly disposed of. To any outside observers, that was the end of the matter. Jesus had entered the power-politics of the city, got chewed up and was spat out on the other side. Caesar’s power may have been mocked but Rome’s rule was reasserted. End of story.

Except that it isn’t the end of the story. Three days later, it would be clear that the confrontation hadn’t exactly ended the way it originally seemed. What the world had seen as weakness, would be shown to be strength. What looked like a triumph of Roman power, would be revealed actually to be its subversion. And what everyone knew was death, would turn out to be in fact the beginning of new life. Rome knew what to do with those who challenged its power with armed rebellion; it had no idea what to do about a revolutionary who wouldn’t fight, but who died, sacrificed himself to inaugurate a new kingdom, a whole new rule on earth.. And so the greatest military power the world had seen was undone by a peasant-king who came bouncing into town on the back of a shaggy donkey. Thanks be to God! Amen.