

Reflections for Holy Week

Palm Sunday

Reading: Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29

¹Give thanks to the LORD, because he is good,
and his love is eternal.

²Let the people of Israel say,
“His love is eternal.”

¹⁹Open to me the gates of the Temple;
I will go in and give thanks to the LORD!

²⁰This is the gate of the LORD;
only the righteous can come in.

²¹I praise you, LORD, because you heard me,
because you have given me victory.

²²The stone which the builders rejected as worthless
turned out to be the most important of all.

²³This was done by the LORD;
what a wonderful sight it is!

²⁴This is the day of the LORD's victory;
let us be happy, let us celebrate!

²⁵Save us, LORD, save us!
Give us success, O LORD!

²⁶May God bless the one who comes in the name of the LORD!
From the Temple of the LORD we bless you.

²⁷The LORD is God; he has been good to us.
With branches in your hands, start the festival
and march round the altar.

²⁸You are my God, and I give you thanks;

I will proclaim your greatness.

²⁹Give thanks to the LORD, because he is good,

and his love is eternal.

Matthew 21: 1-11

¹As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage at the Mount of Olives. There Jesus sent two of the disciples on ahead ²with these instructions: “Go to the village there ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied up with her colt beside her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³And if anyone says anything, tell him, ‘The Master needs them’; and then he will let them go at once.”

⁴This happened in order to make what the prophet had said come true:

⁵“Tell the city of Zion,

Look, your king is coming to you!

He is humble and rides on a donkey

and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

⁶So the disciples went and did what Jesus had told them to do: ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, threw their cloaks over them, and Jesus got on. ⁸A large crowd of people spread their cloaks on the road while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds walking in front of Jesus and those walking behind began to shout, “Praise to David's Son! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! Praise God!”

¹⁰When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was thrown into an uproar. “Who is he?” the people asked.

¹¹“This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee,” the crowds answered.



The Eastern (Golden) Gate, Jerusalem

The Old city of Jerusalem is surrounded by a large defensive wall. In the wall are eight gates.

One of these gates, the Eastern Gate, facing the Mount of Olives is sealed shut. It is reputed to be the oldest gate of the Old City, and stands on the sight of an even older gate. It is known as the Golden Gate, or Gate of Mercy and would have given direct access to what would have been the area of the Jewish Temple.

The Jewish feast of Yom Kippur, their most religious festival when Jews would seek forgiveness for all their sins. During temple times, the action of the high priest would be to symbolically place all the sins of the people on a sacrificial goat. This goat would then be sent out into the wilderness, taking the people's sins with it, never to return. Hence the use now of the term 'scapegoat'. It is believed that the goat was sent out through the Eastern Gate, as it was closest to the Temple.

The gate is also significant for Jews as they believe the promised Messiah will enter Jerusalem through the Eastern Gate. In 1541, the gate in its present form, was sealed shut by the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman. He was a devout Muslim. He knew the significance the gate held to the Jewish people who were awaiting their Messiah, and to prevent the Messiah, when he came, from entering the city, Suleiman had the Eastern Gate sealed shut. And so it remains today.

For Christians that is of no consequence, for on Palm Sunday, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, entered Jerusalem through the Eastern Gate.

Today is Palm Sunday, the day the church remembers Jesus' triumphal entry in Jerusalem at Passover. The beginning of Holy Week, which will seemingly end in tears, but finishes in victory.

Did you know that there were two parades that day? Possibly not, as the other parade is not mentioned in the New Testament.

That same day, on the other side of town, Pontius Pilate was entering Jerusalem. He was coming in from the coast with 600 foot soldiers, horses, armour, banners and flags and standards bearing great carved golden eagles (the symbol of Roman authority).

Jerusalem, during Passover, would have been teeming with Jewish pilgrims and been a hotbed of tension, and Rome wanted Israel to be in no doubt about who was in charge, so Pilate was sent into Jerusalem to oversee the keeping of the peace.

Can you imagine it? The sun glinting on metal and gold. The sound of marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating drums. The swirling of dust. And the cheers for this parade would have been eerily similar to the ones we think of when we remember Palm Sunday: Caesar was Rome's 'Prince of Peace'; Caesar was Rome's 'Son of God', and Pontius Pilate was his representative.

And then on the other side of town came Jesus, down the Mount of Olives. As Matthew tells it in today's reading, it is a pre-arranged 'counter procession'. Jesus planned it in advance. As Jesus approaches the city from the east at the end of the journey from Galilee, he tells two of his disciples to go to the next village and get him a colt they will find there, one that has never been ridden, that is a young one. They do so, and Jesus rides the colt down the Mount of Olives and enters the city through the Eastern Gate, surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic followers and sympathisers, who spread their cloaks, strew leafy branches on the road, and shout 'Hosanna! Praise God! God bless him who come in the name of the Lord! God bless the coming kingdom of King David, our father! Praise God!'. The imagery of Jesus couldn't have been clearer: 'I am for peace!'

This triumphal entry was a send-up, a take-the-mickey parody of Pilate's grand procession.

Jesus' 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' procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God.

'So what' some might say. 'So what if there are two parades - what does that matter?'

Well, I think it matter, because there are always two parades, aren't there? And we have to decide which one we'll join.

When we choose to forgive - or not....we walk a certain way.

When we choose to love our enemies instead of hating them...we walk a certain way.

When we choose what we'll do with our money, our energy, our love...we walk a certain way.

When we follow in the footsteps of those who have protested for peace, justice, freedom, we are choosing which parade we are joining.

When we choose to follow Jesus...we walk a certain way.

When we live with the hope of the Gospel in our hearts...we walk a certain way.

When we have peace in the knowledge that we are deeply loved by God...we walk a certain way.

When we share that love and peace and Gospel with others...we walk a certain way.

There are always two parades in town...this Holy Week - which one will you join?

Prayer:

Christ, you rode on; through the riotous cheers and the menacing uneasy whispers - you rode on towards a place they could not imagine, and you asked them to follow...And Lord, it's frightening - because all these centuries later, you ask the same thing: 'Stay with me....' 'Follow me' You keep asking us to get up, to follow your path, to change our ways, our direction, our way of thinking.

But all too often instead of following and staying with you, we choose to stay put - to stick close to what's familiar - to surround ourselves with our own kind - to relax in our comfort zones.

Lord, during this most Holy week, help us to change direction - help us to take up our lives and walk with you and for others.

God, you keep asking us to go the extra mile - to walk with others, to share our provisions, to veer off and visit the prisoner or feed the hungry, to carry your cross...

But all too often, Lord, we give up halfway, and run off, or amble away, or do an impressive sidestep.

Lord, during this most Holy time, help us to keep dancing and limping on, that our steps may accompany yours and be for others.

Christ, as you ride on through the riotous cheers and the menacing uneasy whispers - as you ride on towards a place we cannot imagine, help us to stay with you, help us to follow - For we are the body that has come after you - we are the answer to your prayers. Idle watchers would call that foolish, hesitant waver would call that frightening - but we here today, call that a blessing. Amen