

“JESUS TRIUMPHANT”

**a sermon on Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 27:11-54
for Passion/Palm Sunday**

**April 9, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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We often refer to the events of Palm Sunday as Jesus’ “Triumphal entry into Jerusalem.” Actually, the Gospel writers never used the word “triumphant.” But the images and symbols of Palm Sunday come from Old Testament texts, most notably the prophesy of Zechariah, where the prophet is describing the future time of Israel’s restoration. In his vision of that glorious time are these words:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; *triumphant* and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

The guiding image of Palm Sunday is that of a king returning from battle victorious. He has won. He has prevailed. Now there can finally be peace in the land. It’s like a New York City “ticker tape” parade. It celebrates an accomplishment achieved.

And that raises an interesting question. It is the events of the crucifixion and resurrection which we believe were the real triumphs of Jesus and God the Father over the forces of darkness and human sin, and they had not yet taken place when Jesus entered Jerusalem that day.

So why did Jesus choose to enter the city “triumphantly” to the cheers of the people, and the considerable dis-ease of the local officials?

With the understanding that we will have other opportunities to consider the crucifixion and resurrection later this week and beyond, I want to focus this morning on what Jesus had in fact *already* accomplished by the time he entered the holy city, and what therefore made his “triumphal entry” both important and appropriate.

Will Willimon points out that the first question on everyone’s lips in Jerusalem that day, according to our reading from Matthew’s account, was “who is this?” You have to understand, those were the days before “advertising,” “mass

media,” and rapid communication. Some people knew Jesus was coming, but others simply had to come out and see, and ask those up ahead in the crowd, or who seemed to know. “And the crowds said,” in response, “this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.”

“Prophecy,” Willimon writes, “had died out in Israel by the First Century. Speakers of the truth had been in short supply for hundreds of years. John the Baptist was hailed by his followers as a modern prophet. Herod the King took one look at John, listened in on one of his sermons in which he spoke of the business community and the clergy as a ‘brood of vipers,’ and promptly had John murdered. Prophets and the powerful have never been close.”

Jesus was a “truth-teller.” He revealed and communicated the Will of the Father to the people. He called the guilty to repentance, he declared God’s mercy and grace. He was a prophet in the best sense of the word, one whose “thus saith the Lord” really *meant* “thus saith the Lord,” and not just “thus saith me *wishing* I was the Lord!”

Jesus triumphed in his proclamation, in the message he delivered. He triumphed in that other voices and powers were not able to silence him, even when they tried. And according to Luke, those voices and powers were still trying to silence Jesus as he entered the city. “Rebuke your disciples!” they shouted to him as he rode along. And he answered them, “if these were silent, the very stones would shout out!”

Jesus triumphed in truth, which was the core of his message. In John’s account of the trial, that is the very word Jesus uses in his defense: “for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.” Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly as a “truth-teller.”

Luke’s account of the trial makes it clear that Jesus was also triumphant in innocence. Innocence is the common theme of the entire trial narrative. Pilate can’t condemn Jesus. He hasn’t done anything wrong! And this, by the way, from a man known in history to have been downright brutal on many other occasions.

“So I’ll send him to Herod,” Pilate concluded. Same story. Misguided, perhaps. But not guilty of any crime. Jesus was an innocent man. Jesus triumphed in that he arrived in the holy city clean and guiltless.

That is important theologically, of course, because it was Jesus’ innocence that made his sacrifice holy and acceptable. But it is also important ethically, because it becomes clear that we who follow Jesus are called similarly called to lives of “innocence,” in imitation of our Lord.

“The Christian Life,” we call it. It is not a life of escapism, waiting to leave this evil place, and therefore a life where it simply doesn’t matter how we live or what we accomplish. The Christian life is a life of engagement with the world around us – as we find it – where our goal is to get involved, and make a difference as we make our way down the path.

The fact that in this life we will never be “guiltless” or attain “perfection” as Jesus did does not mean that we are not called to strive for that perfection and continue to work at it.

Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphant in righteousness. Oh, he broke a “Sabbath law” or two. He was not an ascetic. He lived life to its fullest. He celebrated when there was cause. He mourned when he faced tragedy and loss. And that is precisely why his triumph is so powerful. Jesus triumphed in *character*. There was absolute consistency between what he preached, and how he lived. May that be our goal in life!

In case you haven’t yet noticed it, the focus of this sermon is the “offices of Christ.” As you have heard me say on more than one occasion, our confessions proclaim that “Christ, as our redeemer, [executes] the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king.” Prophets proclaim God’s will to the people. Priests make our relationship “right” with God. Although the events of the end of holy week bring those offices to their ultimate fulfillment, Jesus was clearly triumphant in them even *before* his death and resurrection, through his teachings, and by his example.

The office of “king” is the one with which we have the most trouble, even though it is the office most blatantly displayed on Palm Sunday. It is not a triumphant *prophet* who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, or a triumphant *priest* who was welcomed by the waving of palm branches. It was the nation’s leader, its *king*.

And it was Jesus’ choice of “royal” imagery that so angered the Pharisees and others. It was royal imagery that Herod and the Roman soldiers used to mock him. And in a real bit of irony, it was that very mockery that, according to Luke’s account, brought an end to the enmity that had previously existed between Herod and Pilate.

Even in cruel humor, there is proof that Jesus’ third office was being fulfilled. Kings are responsible for relationships. They (or those who serve under them) settle disputes in the land, keep the peace, and oversee the relationship of their nation with other nations.

The oversight of relationships is what it means to “rule.” Kingship is “people business.” And everywhere Jesus went, he helped people straighten out their interpersonal relationships: get their priorities right, learn to be at peace with each other, stop “casting stones,” care more, help more. Jesus was in the people business. He still is. And so is the Christian Church. That is our job. It is why we are here this morning, waving branches, and shouting “Hosanna to the King!”

What a pity that in order for the Christian community to really become united as a people, our King had to die a cruel death on the cross. But he had to be king in order for his death to have meaning and value. A king he was. And our King he is.

And so we celebrate Jesus’ arrival into Jerusalem this morning. But we also grieve, this morning, because we know where he was headed. Follow along with us through the days of this week, as we go, with Jesus, to the upper room, to Gethsemane and Golgotha, and as we finally arrive at the empty tomb next Sunday morning.

In those events, you will witness Jesus in all three of his “essential roles” – as he continues to be a truth teller, proclaiming the Good News of his self-sacrifice as our “high priest,” assuring our forgiveness and reconciliation with God, and as he eventually takes his rightful place on the throne, when all is said and done, and becomes the true Lord of our lives by dwelling in our hearts.

We move, now, from this “day of triumph,” to the days ahead, where the “final triumph” comes only after the events that give it effect – the pain, the torture, the mockery, the abandonment, and everything that should make us *ashamed* to be a part of the human community that could do all of that to this “innocent” man. But we did. We all did. We are all – to use a term that is being tossed around a lot these days in the news – “complicit.”

But that is exactly the point. We all *need* Jesus to be triumphant, because if he isn’t, then we have no hope. Thanks be to God for the victory that is coming.

And to God be the glory.