



PALM SUNDAY

The Two Processions on “Palm Sunday”

Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30... One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession.

From the East, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the Kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class.....

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus’s procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate’s proclaimed the power of the empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’s crucifixion. Pilate’s military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology... it was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the Jewish festivals... to be in the city in case there was trouble.... The mission of the troops with Pilate was to reinforce the Roman permanently stationed in the Fortress Antonia, overlooking the Jewish Temple and its courts.... Imagine the imperial procession’s arrival in the city.

A visual panoply of imperial power, cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful. 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... For Rome’s Jewish subjects, Pilate’s procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology. ‘counterprocession’... the meaning of the demonstration is clear, for it used symbolism from the prophet Zechariah in the Jewish Bible. According to Zechariah, a king would be coming to Jerusalem (Zion), ‘humble’ and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey’ (9:9).

In Mark the reference to Zechariah is implicit. Matthew, when he treats Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem, makes the connection explicit by quoting the passage: ‘Tell the daughter of Zion: look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey’ (Matt.21.5 quoting Zech. 9:9). The rest of the Zechariah passage details what kind of king he will be: ‘He 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’ (9:10).

The 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.

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.

This contrast- between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar- is central not only to the gospel of Mark, but to the story of Jesus and early Christianity. The confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus's life....Holy week is the story of this confrontation."

Following Jesus this Holy Week is within the context of fear, anxiety and self-isolation. There has been a pattern of big announcements by the Government on Friday with a surge of case and deaths expected around Easter. The story of Christianity is more than the story of Calvary – it is also about Easter and the empty tomb. Same alternatives today- Which procession am I in? Holy week and Easter is about the identity of Jesus as a humble Messiah not as one coming to power. His is the example of patient endurance. Holy week is bringing our own suffering and that of others. We see health workers and so many giving of themselves generously. This Palm Sunday we welcome Jesus as the Lord of our homes and our lives.