

Today, we are asked to hold together two scenes that do not seem to belong to the same narrative. They are so vastly different...yet.

A parade of palm branches and praise—"Hosanna! Blessed is the King of Israel!"
And a procession toward death—"Crucify him."
A humble entry...and a humiliating execution.

When we read these together we feel a bit unsettled. They don't line up neatly. How can they be part of the same story? How can this be the same crowd? How can this be the same King?

John 12:12-27

Back in the day, the animal on which a king rode into the city was significant. It said a lot about their personality and it signaled their reason for coming into the city. Of course, there is something to be said about a king who came into the city on a donkey over a king who came in on a warhorse. A king on a warhorse was all presentation. His purpose was to get the people pepped up – to prepare their hearts for a magnificent battle under the generalship of an amazing leader whose posture touted, "Look at me and despair, my enemies!"

There were always uprisings in Jerusalem against the Romans– especially during high celebrations – like the Passover. What a disappointment it must have been to those seeking a zealous nationalist leader to open the gates to one coming into the city on a donkey. A king, yes. But not the kind they expected. Not the kind we expect.

Culturally, this meant that the "leader" was coming into the city not as a mighty conqueror but as a friend with no agenda of fighting. A king on a horse was prepared for battle or conquest. By choosing a donkey, Jesus signaled his kingdom was not a military or political one. Unlike the grand processions of Roman generals in chariots, riding a donkey emphasized his humbleness and his ordinariness. It showed a leader who connected with common, often oppressed people.

Jesus processed into the city that day– humble yet triumphant. The next week he then processed out of the city– humble and seemingly defeated.

John 19:16-22

It is a different kind of parade than what I first described. What I find interesting, though, is that both Jesus' parades are a bit like "a Roman Triumph." This was meant to publicly honor a military commander who achieved a major victory.

Usually, it was held in Rome and processed from the military headquarters of the city to the temple of Jupiter. The victorious general on a mighty warhorse led the parade. He was dressed to resemble the god, Jupiter, - mainly a purple toga and a laurel wreath crown.

After the triumphant military commander in full regalia came the Senate, then musicians, then the spoils captured in battle followed by bound captives, and last by the soldiers chanting. It was meant to reaffirm the power of Rome over all who would rebel.

When the captives “processed” the crowds jeered, humiliated and mocked them. Rotten food, dung, rocks and other distasteful things were thrown at the captives as they passed. When the procession reached the temple of Jupiter, the military general would make a sacrifice to the god for success in battle. Here the humiliated captives would be killed in the name of Jupiter, the supreme god of the Romans.

You can see the similarities to both parades here. A joyous celebratory triumphal parade to the temple of Yahweh led by a humble king, followed by his people shouting and chanting, “Hosannah. Lord, Help us, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

And later, a parade of a king, dressed in purple with a crown of thorns, humiliated, no longer praised but paraded before the jeering crowds - being led to the place of death.

And in a mockery of the Roman Triumph, Jesus himself was the opposite of both the triumphant king and the humiliated sacrifice. He was the humbled king and the triumphant sacrifice.

He carried his own cross to a place called The Skull. And above him, nailed for all to see, are the words: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” And suddenly, the religious leaders were very concerned. “Don’t write that,” they said. “Don’t say he *is* the King. Say he *claimed* to be.” But Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.” And there it remained for all to see. For all to wrestle with.

Here is a dissonance. The one they shouted “Hosanna” to...was the one to whom they later shouted “Crucify.” The one they hoped would save them...was the one they later accused, rejected, and destroyed. If we are honest, we’re like the crowd too. How is it that we turn so quickly? Do we follow the whims of the crowd blindly, like those in the two parades seemed to do?

Because the truth is—we know this movement. We have lived this movement. We’ve cried “Lord, Save us!” when we’re desperate and we want God to help and act. But sometimes... when God does not act the way we hoped—when healing comes slowly, or differently, or not at all—when justice is delayed, when the path is costly—something within us shifts. And maybe we too begin to say: “This is not what I meant.” “This is not what I asked for.” “This cannot be God’s will.”

We may not shout “Crucify”—but we may withdraw. We may harden. We find excuses to put the blame anywhere but on us. And sometimes, like the chief priests, we say: “Don’t write that.” Don’t name it that way. Don’t call this truth. Don’t say this is what is happening.

We prefer a version of reality that is easier to manage. It is less costly; less revealing. Because to name the truth is to face something uncomfortable: That the King we longed for... is not the King we received. Or perhaps more truthfully: The King we received is not the one we were prepared to follow.

Even in the earliest days, people looked at the cross and said: “This is foolish.” “This is absurd.” “This cannot be divine.” A crucified God? A powerless king? A savior who does not save himself?

It didn’t make sense then and if we are honest—it still doesn’t make sense now because we are drawn to power that looks like control. Victory that looks like winning and strength that looks like force. But Jesus...Jesus is something else entirely.

He is not without zeal—but his zeal is not violent. He is not without power—but his power is self-giving, his victory looks, to the powerful, like surrender and his strength looks like love. He loves all the way to the end.

And here is where the dissonance deepens. John tells us that Christ’s trial and walk to the cross and crucifixion is not failure. It is fulfillment. And it is full of God’s glory. Glory... that looks like this? A body broken, a life poured out, a king lifted up—not on a throne, but on a cross. And yet—this is how God chooses to reveal love. Not by conquering enemies, but by reconciling them.

God’s love isn’t revealed by overthrowing kings, it’s not about coup d’états, it’s not about planting zealous insurrectionists in crowds to stir up violence.

God’s glory is revealed in love and love is revealed by healing, not destroying; by offering life, not forcing salvation through fear.

God’s love never demands hero-worship or hating those who think differently than we do. God’s power isn’t like the powerful of the world around us. And so, we are left here standing between two parades. Palms in our hands...and the shadow of a cross before us.

We feel the dissonance and we don’t quite know what to do with it. And maybe... that is the point because Jesus does not rush to resolve the tension. He invites us to **dwell in it** . He says, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Full abundant life comes through death of our selfishness, pride and power. God’s glory is shown through us when we surrender to the will of God. “Your will be done”. God’s kingdom – is not one of fear, but of love.

So what does it mean... for us... to worship this kind of King? It means we resist the pull of the crowd. The popular people around us can’t influence us to swing from hope to accusation. We learn to stay. To stay when it is confusing, costly, or uncool.

It means to stay when love asks more of us than we want to give and to tell the truth even when it implicates us; even when it reveals that we, too, are capable of rejecting what is good and healing and holy for the easy, popular and prideful.

It means we follow Jesus—not just in the parade of palms — but on the road to the cross. Choosing humility and mercy and self-giving love.

Later that afternoon, while dying on the cross, Jesus said, “It is finished.” He didn’t say, “It is over.” No. He said, “It is finished. My work here is complete. God’s work has been fulfilled. God’s love has gone all the way. What will happen next is the next part of the grand scheme of God’s love. Light has entered the darkness. And nothing—not even death—will have the final word.

Love Wins

So we stand here, in the dissonance between shouting “Hosannah! Lord, save us” and “Crucify him!”

Where do we fit? Do we like where we are in the crowd following Christ? Do we spit at Christ – showing contempt to the one who came for the lost and the least?

Do we wave our branches and shout with joy, making way for the one who comes in God’s name? Don’t we do both?

This week as we enter passion week, take time to live in that dissonance – not resolving it, not explaining it away but allowing it to work on us; to soften us and to call us deeper into being truly loved and known.

And, if you have the inclination, ask yourself – perhaps daily, “Will I, do I follow the king I want or the king who actually came?”