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Palm Sunday A: Matthew 21:1-11

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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis, MD

Making Our Entrance

Today's Gospel is about making an entrance – about how Jesus makes his entrance into Jerusalem on what we have come to call Palm Sunday.

There is something about making an entrance. I went to high school in Racine, Wisconsin. In this city of about 85,000, prom mania takes over the city for a few days every year. The first sign that it is almost time for the high school senior prom is that bleachers are put up, lining the sides of 5th Street, leading up to the entrance to Festival Hall. For more than 50 years the Rotary Club has sponsored a city-wide high school post-prom party. It's a way to offer high school students a safe and positive place to go after each individual school's prom, and high school seniors from 8 city high schools participate. One of the big traditions that has developed over the years, though, isn't about the party. It's about how prom-goers arrive at the party. Students vie for the most extravagant forms of transportation, arriving by horse drawn carriage, classic car, fire truck, 18-wheel big-rig, parade float, boats towed on trailers, even riding on elephants. Bleachers are set up so spectators can watch the elaborate parade of prom-goers making their entrance, disembarking from their transportation, walking the red carpet, waving to photographers and fans in the stands, while local TV carries the event live. It's all about making an entrance.

The ancient Romans knew about making an entrance as well. They knew about spectacle. And none of this would be lost on those people lining the streets on the way into Jerusalem when Jesus entered the Holy City. A victorious Roman general would enter a city in what was called a Triumph. A Roman Triumph was “a solemn procession in which a victorious general entered the city [of Rome] in a chariot drawn by four horses.”ⁱ The order of

the procession was this: “before the victorious general went the captives and spoils taken in war. He was followed by those who had been liberated by virtue of conquest and then the officers and soldiers of the triumphant army.”ⁱⁱ Trumpeters marching on foot announced the approach of the general and his army and flowers were cast upon the road in honor of the victor.ⁱⁱⁱ A mighty victor welcomed into the city – spoils and captives before, liberated people and army following after, the way strewn with flowers, as trumpets proclaim the victor’s entrance.

And now comes Jesus to the city of Jerusalem. As David Jacobson writes, “In this humble semblance of a [Roman] Triumph, Jesus the victor arrives not on a [chariot drawn by four horses], but on a donkey. [Jesus] is heralded not by trumpets, but by those proclaiming ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’”^{iv} Not flowers, but branches of palm and people’s own garments are strewn on the road before him. Matthew tells us that in this triumphal procession there were those who went before Jesus and those who followed after him – an odd detail unless we know about the procession order of the Roman Triumph. There were those who went before Jesus – captives, not to an imperial Roman force, but to the good news; captives to a vision of a new kingdom, the kingdom of God; prisoners, not of war, but of hope. There were those who followed the victorious Jesus: those liberated from sin and disease, those who felt themselves set free by Jesus and his good news that the kingdom of heaven had come near. Amongst this procession were disciples, people healed, blind people whose sight had been restored, people who had been deaf now able to hear, people who had been disturbed and distraught and depressed now sane and sound and hopeful. This Triumphant entry of Jesus and his jubilant supporters may not have had the military precision of the Roman generals. Those who followed Jesus bore none of the gleaming arms, imperial standards, armor or uniforms of the Roman soldiers in procession. But neither was there compulsion or fear. Just jubilation and praise. As they entered the city of Jerusalem that day, they came in with joy. They were yet ignorant of the victory that yet lay ahead. Those accompanying Jesus could not yet envision the triumph Jesus would accomplish on the cross. They could not yet imagine the paradoxical reality that by his wounds we are healed, by his death, we have life. What they knew on that day was they needed to celebrate, they knew the necessity of praise, the jubilant desire to proclaim thanksgiving for demons expelled, healings accomplished, sins forgiven, new life begun. “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they shouted. The Victorious One has arrived, humble and riding on a donkey. Our humble king is triumphant and we need to shout out our

praise. It is appropriate, a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give God thanks and praise.

The Roman Triumph did not end at the gateway to the city. In the Roman Triumph, once inside the city walls, the victorious general went straight to the temple of Jupiter to offer sacrifice. Jesus too, in Matthew's Gospel, does not just come into the city of Jerusalem. He goes directly to the temple. If we were to read the very next words that follow our gospel reading for today we would hear this, "then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves" (Matt 21:12). The blind and the lame come to Jesus in the temple and he heals them. Children cry out, as children sometimes do in a house of worship, and Jesus praises them. Like the Roman general, Jesus would make a sacrifice. But his sacrifice would not be the easy general's sacrifice, leaving his victor's laurels at the foot of a statue of Jupiter. Jesus would let go of his whole life. But not until Friday. There was more to do in the meantime.

This mention of Roman Triumph and Jesus' Peasant parade is no mere exercise in comparison and contrast. Because on this first Palm Sunday, there are indeed two processions going on, two processions making an entrance into Jerusalem.^v Even as Jesus is arriving in Jerusalem, humble and riding on a donkey, Pontius Pilate, Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria is arriving in that same city at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus and his followers are coming to observe the Passover. Pilate has no regard for the Jewish festival and no respect for their devotion. Pilate and the extra troops are making their entrance to be in the city in case there is trouble during the festival. Pilate and the Roman soldiers are there to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed in the Fortress Antonia, overlooking the Jewish temple and its courts. Pilate has little interest in being in Jerusalem, but it comes with the job, a duty to bear, to get through, so he can return to his governor's palace on the seacoast. He hopes there wouldn't be much trouble this year. But if there is, he and his soldiers will be ready for it.

Two processions enter the city of Jerusalem: Jesus, proclaimer of the kingdom of God, proclaimer of love and forgiveness, of second chances. Healer of heart and mind and body. King of Kings, Prince of Peace. Bringer of love, whatever the cost. Fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah: "He

will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse 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.” Hosanna to the Son of David! cry the wavers of palm branches. Hosanna to the Son of David! cry even the children.

And Pilate. With imperial power to back him. Trumpets and drum beat to announce his arrival, the clink of bridle, the creak of leather, the stamping of feet, the swirling of dust, glint of sunlight on metal spear and golden standard. His watchwords: Might. Order. Whatever the cost.

Two processions enter the city. Two rulers have made their entrance. Who is the one to watch? Whose procession are we part of? Which procession do we want to be part of? These are our questions as we make our entrance into this Holy Week.

ⁱ *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. by William Smith (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1865), 1163. This note and the next came to my attention thanks to an excellent paper written by David Jacobson, “The Humble Victory of Jesus, the Coming King: The Jewish and Roman Context of Jesus’ Entry into Jerusalem in Matthew 2:1-17” for a class on the Gospel according to Matthew at the Ecumenical Institute of St. Mary’s Seminary and University in Baltimore in the Fall Semester 2010.

ⁱⁱ Brent Kinman, *Jesus’ Entry into Jerusalem in the Context of Lukan Theology and the Politics of His Day* (New York: Brill, 1995), 44-45.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Jacobson.

^v Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan make the point of two processions entering Jerusalem – that of Jesus and that of Pontius Pilate in their book *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 2. The description of Pilate’s entourage below comes from them, pages 2-3.