

Lenten Luncheon Reflections

Tuesday, February 12, 2008

Jesus Enters Jerusalem at the Beginning of Holy Week

Opening Hymn: Great is Thy Faithfulness (Stanzas 1 and 3 and refrains)

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for your faithfulness which we have experienced again with the new light and with every provision which you have made for our lives this day. As we gather here at the beginning of Lent we remember the faithfulness of Jesus who set his face to go to Jerusalem even though he knew that suffering and death lay before him there. For his faithfulness to your ways of showing your great love for us and for the whole world we give you praise and thanks as we ask that you will help us all as we walk with him through the events of Holy Week in Jerusalem to come to appreciate more of the great love you have shown for us and for the whole world in him, for it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

Reflections:

I would like to invite you to picture yourself on a spring day in the year 30. You have just arrived in the capital city of Jerusalem as one of the early pilgrims gathering there to celebrate the Passover festival. It is the first day of this holy week of Passover. As you stand there you hear the familiar sounds that you have heard at this time of the year on other occasions. It is the sound coming from the west. You hear the hoofs of the horses and you hear the clink of the military armor and you know very well what is happening. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of

Idumea, Judea and Samaria is on his way into Jerusalem. The mission of the troops with Pilate is to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed in the Fortress Antonia, overlooking the Jewish temple and its courts. They and Pilate have come up from Caesarea Maritima, “Caesarea on the Sea,” about sixty miles to the west. Like the Roman governors of Judea and Samaria before him, Pilate lived in this new and splendid city by the sea. For them, it was much more pleasant than Jerusalem, the traditional capital of the Jewish people, which was inland and insular, provincial and partisan, and often hostile to the Roman authorities. But for the major Jewish festivals, Pilate, like his predecessors and successors, has come to Jerusalem. He has not come out of reverence for the religious devotion of his Jewish subjects, but to be in the city in case there was trouble, as there often was, especially at Passover, the festival in which the Jews remembered and celebrated their earlier liberation from the bondage and slavery of Egypt. Trouble also often arose at such times since the population of the city grew so much. The city which may have had about forty thousand inhabitants during the rest of the year would often two hundred thousand pilgrims or more visiting there at Passover.

As you listen to that now familiar sound at the beginning of Passover of Pilate and his entourage coming into the city you start to hear from the other side of the city to the east some other sounds. No horse hoofs or clinking armor, but human voices, “Hosanna, Blessed Is He who comes in the Name of the Lord.” “Blessed be the Kingdom of our ancestor, David. Hosanna in the Highest.” Curious at what is going on you move in that direction. You notice as the crowd moves towards you a man is riding on a donkey, and people are throwing down their cloaks in front of him, and are cutting down palm branches and waving them in the air. When you ask someone what is going on you hear that the man on the donkey is the wandering rabbi about whom you had been hearing, Jesus from up Galilee. He has ridden a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his

followers. You remember that this Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth in Galilee, and that his message was about the kingdom of God. You can tell that most of his followers also come largely from the peasant class. By the sound of their voices and their appearance it would seem that many of them had journeyed with him to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north. You hear that this procession into Jerusalem marked the culmination of their journey.

I do not know about you, but I have celebrated Palm Sunday for as long as I can remember. As far as I am concerned there has only been one procession of which I have been reminded and which I have celebrated. This, of course, is the one that in various ways is celebrated in many churches on Palm Sunday. This is the one about which we read and thought last Sunday here at the First Presbyterian Church. This is the procession in which Jesus entered the city riding on a donkey while his followers cut down palm branches and waved them and threw down their clothes along his path.

It was only as I was doing some of my background reading on Holy Week for Lent this year that I was introduced to the other procession. We can imagine, though, that if we had been there in Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week in the year 30 it would have been the more familiar procession of Pilate and his entourage that would have had the most impact upon us as it gave such a brilliant and visual display of the power of Rome with cavalry on horses, foot soldiers with their leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners and the golden eagle of Rome mounted on poles, and the sun glistening on the metal and gold.

What is significant for us, of course, is that what appears to be the weak and the powerless procession as compared to the might of Rome is the one that we still remember and celebrate today. Our celebration of this so-called triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, as powerless as it might have seemed to those who observed the two processions highlights where the ultimate source of power really lies.

After all, if these two processions had not taken place at the same time so that later in the week the two people who had been at the center of these processions were brought face to face which one of us would ever have heard the name of Pontius Pilate? The one who comes in apparent weakness and without any power and might is the one whose power we still claim and worship today.

The contrast of the two processions is not only seen in the display of power, it also seen by implication in their theology. Pilate's procession not only displayed the imperial power of the Roman Empire it also reflected the theology of the Roman Empire. According to this theology, the emperor, or Caesar, was not simply the ruler of Rome and of its vast empire, but was considered the Son of God. Such thinking began with one of the greatest of the Roman Emperors Caesar Augustus, who was the emperor when Jesus was born. It was claimed that his father was the Roman god, Apollo, who conceived him in his mother, Atia. Inscriptions refer to him as 'son of God,' "lord" and "savior and as the one who had brought "peace on earth." His successors continued such titles, including Tiberius, the emperor during the time of the public ministry of Jesus. For the Jewish residents of Jerusalem Pilate's procession embodied not only a rival power and social order, but also a rival theology. It reflected not only the domination of the political order of the land of Israel, but also the contempt that Rome had for the Jewish people and for all of their religion and its festivals.

The contrast between the two parades in this respect is highlighted as the crowd that welcomes Jesus cries out, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." Later in the week we see that it is this very religious claim of who Jesus is that is seen by both the Jewish authorities who wanted to keep the peace with Rome, and also by the Roman authorities as a real threat to the Pax Romana, the peace and order that Rome was seeking to maintain there and throughout the whole known world of the time.

The contrast between the two processions is seen also in the style of the two persons who are being honored. Pilate no doubt on his war horse showing his power and authority as he enters Jerusalem is in this way threatening any who would want to cause trouble during the Passover festival. Jesus, in contrast, comes humbly riding on a donkey. No doubt his choice of such an animal had been influenced by the words of the prophet Zechariah that the king would come to Jerusalem, humble, and riding on a donkey.” (Zechariah 9:9). Zechariah had seen that this humble king would be the one who would command peace to the nations. (Zechariah 9:10) There is a very obvious contrast of style amongst these two heroes who entered Jerusalem on that day. Pilate’s procession embodied the power, glory, violence, and dominant system of the empire that ruled the world of its day and sought to maintain the peace of the Empire. Jesus and his procession embodied an alternative vision of how people should relate together, the vision of the kingdom of God. It was the vision of humble, loving service to other people in contrast to that of force and domination of other people. For Jesus being “king” meant not making claims about control and domination, and about grinding enemies into the dust and building monuments of battle. Instead, it meant obedience to a divine calling, acceptance of the fact that coming in the name of the Lord meant being God’s servant, even God’s Son, who suffers in love for the whole world.

Whether or not we would have been conscious of it if we had been there on that day, the two processions on this opening day of the week of Passover prepare the city for the contrast and confrontation between these two kingdoms which we will see as we continue to walk with Jesus through Holy Week during Lent this year.

As then, still today, the confrontation presents everyone with a choice as to which way will we follow and of which kingdom do we want to be a part. Sydney

Carter in his hymn in which he depicts Jesus as the “Lord of the Dance” who invites people to join him in the dance reminds us of the choice by which Jesus confronted people throughout his life, and especially as he entered Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week.

Closing Hymn: “Lord of the Dance” (stanzas 1 and 2 and refrains)

Prayer:

Jesus Christ, the One who came in the name of the Lord, help us through this season of Lent to grow in our awareness of what it means to make our commitment to you and to join with you in the dance in which you want to lead us as your followers, for we ask these things in your name. Amen.

Much of the material for this presentation was drawn from the book, “The Last Week,” by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. HarperCollins, 2006.