

VICTORY PARADE OR FUNERAL PROCESSION?

A Sermon for Palm Sunday

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Mark 11:1-11

When President John Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, his body was brought back to Washington D.C. for burial. On the cold November day of his funeral, the solemn procession, which included his casket on a horse-drawn caisson, marched slowly down the grand avenues of the nation's capital to the muffled beat of drums.

One of the searing images of that day is a photo of the slain president's son, three-year-old John-John, standing with his sister and widowed mother, saluting the casket as it went by. But the story is told also of another child who lived in Washington along the route of the procession. This other little boy looked out the window and saw the soldiers marching by, grabbed his toy drum, and ran out to stand on the curb and play. He thought it was a parade, and he wanted to join in.

The crowds who came out that day to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem thought they were coming out to a parade, a big celebration, a big victory procession. And, in a way, it was a parade. "Hosanna," cried the people in praise and adoration. They put their garments on the colt for Jesus to ride on, and even put their cloaks on the ground—not exactly the red carpet, but it's close.

They also put leafy branches on the road. Only John's gospel tells us they were palm branches. Whatever they were, it may seem like a strange gesture to us. But it was not strange to the people who shouted and cheered that day. Putting branches in the road was a gesture reserved for a conquering hero. Earlier in Israel's history, when an invading army had been driven out of the country, the leader of the Israelite forces, Antiochus Epiphanes, had been greeted by the crowds with a parade and palm branches.

Today our heroes get a ticker tape parade down Broadway in New York. In those days the hero got a walk on palm branches leading up to the gates of Jerusalem.

The rock musical “Jesus Christ Superstar” has the crowd singing:

Christ you know I love you
 Did you see I waved?
 I believe in you and God
 So tell me that I’m saved.

Big parade? You’d better believe it.

Or maybe not. On the day of Kennedy’s funeral, the little boy didn’t notice that the parade was moving mighty slow, and that the band was playing music that was not exactly jazzy. He didn’t notice that this was a different sort of parade.

We can wonder if anyone in the crowd in Jerusalem noticed that Jesus’ parade was also a little different, a little out-of focus. There’s that donkey, for instance. Isn’t a conquering hero supposed to come riding in on a white stallion, a symbol of great power? So what’s Jesus doing on a donkey?

It is clear that Jesus intends it deliberately. Why, half the story of Palm Sunday involves getting the donkey—sending the disciples, where the animal will be found, what to say if someone challenges them. Jesus deliberately, positively wants, not a great war horse, but a donkey.

Maybe some in the crowd would have remembered the words of their ancient prophet Zechariah: “Lo, your king comes to you, humble and riding on a donkey.” (9:9) A donkey is a sign of humility. What kind of triumphant entrance is this for a king to make?

Last Saturday at Mule Day I noticed two important-looking black limousines pulling up at the start of the parade. It was Governor Phil Bredesen, the grand-marshal of the parade. Maybe the limos were a way for him to impress everyone with how important a person he is, although he doesn’t seem to be the kind of person who cares much about that sort of thing. The reason for the fancy cars might have been more practical—they were for his protection. After all, governors probably get their share of threats. The people around the governor probably insist that he travel that way. It makes the job of security a lot simpler.

Jesus comes in on a donkey, no Secret Service, no entourage to protect him, unless you count his disciples—what a ferocious fighting force! Riding on a donkey is no protection at all. Somebody could hurt you if you're riding on a donkey. That's the other thing about this parade—there were people that day who were not shouting Hosanna, people who did not wish Jesus well, people who, even then, were plotting to hurt him. And before the week was out, they would have their way.

Victory parade or funeral procession? In a way, it is both. Jesus enters to shouts of acclaim, but he enters the place where he will die.

Here there is joy; later there will be pain.

Here the peasants spread their leafy branches; later the powerful people will spread their lies about him.

Here they wave their hands; later others will brandish a whip.

Here they offer their garments to him; later his garments will be taken from him.

Here the cry is "Hosanna"; before the week is out, shouts of "Crucify him" will fill the air.

Parade or funeral procession? It is both.

My friend Bob Dunham is a minister over in North Carolina. He tells of how his home church used to celebrate Palm Sunday with a wonderfully elaborate ceremony. Not only would people bring in palm branches as we have done today, but some would dress in costume, with one designated as Jesus, riding in a wagon that was gussied up to suggest in a vague sort of way that it was a donkey. The palm fronds would be scattered all up and down the aisles, and everyone, young and old, would shout "Hosanna." It was a wonderful celebration of this day.

Except that one year, he says, because of an oversight, the sanctuary was not cleaned up between Palm Sunday and the following Thursday. So, when the congregation gathered for the Maundy Thursday communion service that night, they discovered that the palm branches were still scattered throughout the church. In the closed-up sanctuary, of course, they had not kept their vivid green color, but were now turning a depressing, shriveled brown. The ushers moved quickly, and in a few minutes the decaying palm branches were thrown out. But Bob said that it occurred to him that it was not such a bad thing to see those branches which had been left over from Sunday. It contrasted the light and enthusiasm of Palm Sunday with the dark and gloom of the final gathering in the

upper room, the fevered prayer in the garden, the arrest, the trial, the blood, the pain, the death.¹

What sort of day is this? Parade or funeral procession? A day of joy or a day of sadness?

We would, I suspect, rather not have it that way. We like our celebrations pure and unadulterated, untarnished by negative thoughts or painful ideas. We would rather have it all joy, and reserve the pain for another day.

The crowd cried “Hosanna.” The literal meaning is: “Save us.” The implication is: “Save us, now.” Save us, Jesus, from the might of Rome. Save us from our poverty. Save us from the sickness that claims the one I love.

We cry it, too. Save me now, prays the cancer patient. Save us from terrorists, cry our citizens. We don’t like being stuck between celebration and suffering. It’s not an easy place to leave.

I was talking to a friend who has recently made his second trip to the Mississippi Gulf Coast to help with repairs to the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. He said that in some ways, this visit was more painful than the one he made some months ago. He visited a little Presbyterian church on the coast—I’ve forgotten the name—with a membership of 75 faithful souls. Just the previous week three families had announced they were leaving, going to live with relatives elsewhere in the U.S., and didn’t plan to return. Three families out of a church membership of 75—that’s a pretty good hit. But each of the families said the same thing: We can’t take it anymore. We want normal, and there is nothing normal about life here anymore.

I cannot blame them. They stuck it out a lot longer than I would have. It’s tough to live in the middle of an ongoing funeral procession. We want our parade cocktails to be mixed fun and happy, without having them watered down by tears and pain.

Yet, dear friends, that is where we live. Even our most joyous moments are tempered by sadness. And, even in our times of grief, we are sustained by hope. What is life—a parade or a funeral procession? Well, it’s a little of both.

¹ Bob Dunham, in a presentation to the Moveable Feast, January 1988.

And Jesus is right there with us. He comes to us in times of great celebration, but he is also there in times of great hurt. Jesus is Lord of all our days, good and bad.

In a strange sort of way, the shout of the crowd had it right: “Hosanna—save us.” They, of course, have in mind a mighty warrior who will save them with strength. To them Jesus will look like a total flop before the week is over—a loser. But in a deeper sense, that is just why Jesus comes, to save them, and us. He saves, not with violence but with gentleness, not by drawing blood, but by shedding his own blood. By his death he offers us life.

Parade of funeral procession? Palm Sunday is both. Our lives contain both kinds of days. And on whichever days we find ourselves, we know our Lord is there. He comes to die. He comes to save. †