

Crosscurrents. That was the name of the monthly newsletter of my first parish. Besides the obvious religious symbolism, it was fitting to that place. Just past our town, the Pend Oreille River flowed into a narrow and steep canyon. A large year-round stream joined the river just above that canyon. Before dams upriver and downriver modified the flow, intersecting currents from spring flooding on river and stream made that canyon treacherous to navigate. And cross-currents is an apt description for hazards flowing through Matthew's stories of Holy Week.

Palm Sunday may look innocent enough. Do we not remember it by singing: "to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring?" It's a children's day! But go beneath the surface, and it is clearly not child's play. Those leafy branches being waved, specified by John's gospel as palm branches? Palm branches were widely used symbols of victory in that era – sometimes in athletics, but also in war. When the Zealots revolted against Roman occupiers a generation later, they minted coins emblazoned with palm branches. As with Maccabean rebels overthrowing occupiers a century earlier, palm branches symbolized Jewish resistance to imperial overlords.

Who doesn't love such a parade? In Luke's account, some religious leaders consider the display a bit too loud for their taste. One opposing current swirls there. But even more ominously, the parade in general and Jesus in particular face a much more dangerous current. Tradition holds that Jesus entered Jerusalem through the Golden Gate, on the eastern side of the Temple Mount. Just to the north of that gate was the Roman fortress called the Antonia. Two of its towers rose above the walls of the Temple platform, providing clear view for its guards of the sights below.

When palm branches wave and praise is sung to a *son of David* (read, a new royal line not of the lineage of Caesar), the currents of Holy Week grow treacherous. The abrupt transition from the 21st to 27th chapters of Matthew sweep all away. Shouts of hosanna shift to shouts of crucify. Hands are washed, to no avail. Crosses are lifted. The scene is flooded, not by waters but by darkness. There is a God-forsaken cry, then a last breath. The only ones who stand vigil, not swept away by these cross-currents, are the women who followed and ministered to Jesus.

For Reflection and Action:

What are the memories that inform your take on Palm Sunday; on the events in Holy Week?

If you could put yourself in one of these stories: which would you choose; why?

Once there:

What would you hope to say; what would you hope to do; what would you hope to learn?