

ENTERING WITH TRIUMPH

Mark 11:1-11

Another Palm Sunday is here. In celebration of that long-ago day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem and was greeted by smiling faces, uplifted voices, a carpet of coats, and waving palms, we too sing our loud hosannas and wave our palms and pin palm-cross reminders onto our clothes. In fact, all four gospel accounts of Palm Sunday have the same heading in the Bible translation we use at Armour Heights: Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Now, those headings aren't original to the Bible, they have been added in over time by different translators and interpreters to help break down the Bible into manageable chunks. But even if we ignore those headings, we very often hear this story referred to as "Jesus' Triumphal Entry." If you look up those words you'll discover a whole slew of articles and blogs and lessons and paintings based around that moment in Jesus' life. Palm Sunday is a day that feels glorious, victorious, triumphant. But is "triumphal" the word that Jesus would use to describe the start of this journey into Jerusalem? Is a triumphal entry something Jesus really stood for?

A triumphal procession, no matter when in history it occurs, most often marks or celebrates a victory. It indicates a win. And it often gets connected to war, to battle, to one power up against another. And perhaps that isn't so terrible. We celebrate various kinds of battles where good triumphs over evil in books and movies and theatre productions and fairy tales and even news stories, all the time. We can all get on board with a story where good triumphs and evil loses. Especially when the good guys are in some way vulnerable or marginalized but are still able to move through hardships and challenges in order to succeed. Through those characters, we feel a vicarious sense of triumph and victory when the antagonist loses. There is a sense of vindication when the bad guys go down. Though, I wouldn't say that's what Jesus wanted. Jesus didn't want to stomp out or eradicate the religious leaders who sought his downfall, his loss of popular interest, and his eventual death. He didn't ride into Jerusalem to prove that he was better than them, or to laugh at their attempts to regain authority. He didn't ride in to show off as "the winner." So why do we call his entry "triumphal"?

Let's also consider what was happening on the other end of the city that day. Another procession was taking place with the governor, Pontius Pilate, and his entourage of soldiers as its focus. We have to remember that this was the start of Passover; the most sacred week of the Jewish year, and one that many would try to spend in Jerusalem where the Temple was located. Jerusalem was full of people who made the pilgrimage to observe Passover, or the "Feast of Freedom," which celebrated the end of slavery through the story of the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt. It also focused on redemption—on God's hand in the liberation and salvation of the

people. People came to Jerusalem to celebrate this from Athens, Egypt, Babylon, Rome, Damascus, Galilee... So it's no wonder Pilate was also there. While many around him celebrated liberation, freedom, and salvation, he and his soldiers were there to remind the Jewish people of another powerful religious order: that of Caesar, who was at the pinnacle of the Roman Empire and held up not just as the supreme ruler, but as the "Son of God." If the Jewish people were going to be celebrating freedom from an earlier empire, then the Romans wanted to be present to remind them who was in power within the current empire. If there was going to be trouble, the Romans wanted to be there to put things in order. For the Jewish people, this imperial parade with Pilate at its helm wasn't just Rome showing off its military power, but also its religion. The message was that they could have their festival, but the real power still resided in the hands of Rome. The Roman Empire held fast to their own brand of triumphalism. It was part of the politics of the day.

The best definition of triumphalism I've ever read is from a theologian who describes it as "the tendency in all strongly held world views... to present themselves as full and complete accounts of reality, leaving little if any debate or difference of opinion."¹ Rome was triumphalist in its belief that it triumphed—at least in its own estimation—over all ignorance, uncertainty, doubt, and any other point of view. So when we look back at Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, riding in humbly on an animal that represented peace more than war, and riding in with a group of followers who shouted "save us; hosanna!" we see how this entry into Jerusalem brings with it a fair amount of risk. To appear triumphant, to appear in any way able to start a revolution that would discount Rome's hold and Caesar's deity, to present a narrative that in any way mocked Rome's military power... well that could easily lead to trouble for Jesus. But there is nothing coincidental about these two processions happening on the same day. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision: the kingdom of God, a kingdom ruled by love.

The crowd who greeted and celebrated Jesus that day were looking for something different from the oppression of Rome; they wanted salvation. But they also lived in a world where in order to get ahead, you had to move up in status; you had to have or in some way gain wealth, acquire honour, display your social superiority, and hold onto or improve the position you held within your own household. And, really, not much has changed in 2000 years. We still live in a society and a culture that values the upward thrust: the need to move up, to gain more, to achieve and find success. We're born into it and have been raised to set ourselves apart; to focus on setting goals and reaching objectives in order to fulfill our full potential, and to not waste it; to stand on our own two feet. We see it in the way our culture values higher salaries and promotions and prestigious positions, and in the way we strive to make our lives better,

¹ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*.

in whatever way that may be. The crowd who followed Jesus into Jerusalem wanted a different kind of life that included freedom and liberation from oppressive powers. In many ways, we want the same: freedom from systems that drag us down and keep the most vulnerable in their state of vulnerability; freedom from political powers that abuse and manipulate and distort; freedom from that which we don't really need, whether material goods or social media or conveniences that are environmentally destructive... But when we start to consider what those things really are and how we use or take advantage of them in our lives, we may also realize how hard it is to actually give them up. Following Jesus on that donkey may mean being told to love someone you don't even like; it may mean letting go of privileges you've been so used to having that you didn't even notice they were privileges; it may mean expanding your definition of generosity through time or money; it may mean advocating for people or situations when, in truth, you'd rather sit back and let others do that challenging work and simply cheer them on from the sidelines; it may mean letting go of an idea you've been holding onto for years because your eyes have been opened to the ways it limits accessibility or inclusion; it may mean educating yourself in something that you have avoided involvement with because it makes you uncomfortable. But this is the direction that Jesus leads us in. Jesus doesn't move upward toward kingship the way the crowd expected him to. He leads the crowd, and all of us, *toward each other*. If anything, he leads us down: down to our knees where we can see eye to eye with those who have been neglected, shunned, or isolated by their vulnerabilities; down into the places where relationships are built instead of status, where community is emphasized instead of the individual, where connections are made not to get ahead but to understand and hear and know. It's the direction that is guided by grace. It is movement from a human kingdom to a divine kingdom; a kingdom where love rules above all else. And you can't get there on a war horse, only on a donkey. And you can't get there by pushing others out of the way in order to move up, you can only get there by moving toward them.

Which brings us back to the original question: is Jesus' entry to Jerusalem really best described as triumphal? What does it mean to triumph when your mission isn't to overcome or liberate through power, fear, or violence? What does it mean to triumph when your goal isn't to move up or get ahead in ways that society dictates as the norm? How can triumph be found through the kind of salvation that Jesus offers?

It seems that "triumph" is a paradox. Jesus does not triumph with weapons or power or war horses. Jesus does not triumph with political prowess or family wealth or triumphalist tendencies. And yet, Jesus still triumphs. Jesus triumphs with the truth of God's upside down kingdom; a kingdom which turns our earthly value system on its head and focuses on radical generosity, servant leadership, peacemaking, and forgiveness. It's a kingdom where God's love triumphs over all, and not just all of Jerusalem, over all of creation. It condemns greedy hands, power-hungry authority, injustice, apathy, indifference, and replaces it with freedom and new life, with peace, hope, and love. In this upside-down kingdom, value systems aren't used to restrict

others from the community, they are turned on their heads as a means to gain further reach, to invite, to instill hope for greater community involvement and activity—to move *toward*, not up. In this upside-down kingdom, to triumph means discovering more of God's character. It means meeting Jesus where you are at. It means being willing to open yourself to the movement of the Spirit. To triumph means being able to ask questions of our faith, to have doubts, to challenge assumptions. Palm Sunday is a day of triumph because we can live with hope and faith in a God who seeks peace for all of creation, who forgives all of creation, who loves all of creation.

But here's the other thing about Jesus' triumphal entry: we know that it will be followed by tragedy. We can't read this story on its own and assume that following Jesus will always lead to triumph and the success of God's upside-down kingdom of love. We can't shout our hosannas and assume that everything will work out perfectly. Because there will absolutely be tragedy, difficulties, defeats, and uncertainties. Jesus' triumphal entry is only the beginning of a journey that leads to the cross. Though Jesus leads us toward one another, not everyone is ready to embrace that kind of love and generosity and community and vision. We see this in the way the religious leaders of the time see not love in Jesus' message, but instead the stripping away of their authority and power. We see this in the way they try to emphasize their authority over Jesus' authority, the way Jesus is taken to trial, the way he is nailed to a cross. But they neglect to see that Jesus isn't trying to move up, he is offering an embrace that does not rely on hierarchy or power. He is offering hope and wholeness.

So as we sing our songs with "hosanna" on our lips, as we get excited about the parade of hope that Jesus represents, as we feel new life coursing through us as we embrace God's upside down vision of love and justice and movement toward one another, we also need to ask how much we are willing to contribute to this mission of peace, to this kingdom where love prevails. When the parade comes to an end, where will we be? What are our next steps on this journey? Will we journey with Jesus all the way down the Mount of Olives and stand with him at the cross? Will we be there expecting that God's kingdom will simply appear, or is this where the work really begins? How do we follow Jesus through this week and beyond?

In this upside-down kingdom Jesus sits on a donkey and chooses to enter into a city that at once celebrates him and reviles him. He chooses to enter into a world that doesn't truly understand what it means to live in an upside down way and winds his way down that mountain to a cross. He chooses to embrace rejection, betrayal, despair, because he also chooses hope in God; and with hope comes new life. With hope there is triumph. Amen.