

Processions

The Venerable Stephen Muir

Palm Sunday, 2022

One of the things Anglicans do very well is to have a procession. If you have ever attended a big service at the Cathedral it will begin with a procession of people as they enter the church as the first hymn is sung.

First comes the crucifer bearing the cross, then the acolytes with candles, then the choir members followed by the deacons, then the priests, with people walking two side by side up the central aisle.

The Archdeacons follow, then the dean and finally the bishop.

There is an order to a procession - it might seem to be from least important to most important. But it's not. After all, the crucifer leads the procession with the cross - the symbol of Christ.

A procession actually follows the saying of Jesus that "the first shall be last, and the last shall be first." The last person in a procession is the bishop, or an Archbishop if one is present. Bishops hold an office that is not one of power but one of service. The bishop is the servant of the diocese, and of course a servant of Christ.

In our palm Sunday reading we remember a different procession. This one features Jesus riding on a donkey from the Mount of Olives, down through the Kidron Valley, then uphill again to the eastern gate of the city of Jerusalem.

As Luke tells the story, it is a small but exuberant group of Jesus' followers. They are rejoicing that Jesus is coming to the Holy City to take his place and assume his role as the messiah. They cheer "Hosanna!" which means "Save please" or "Save, we pray!"

They sing out “blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

They sing “Peace in heaven, and glory to the highest heaven!”

We remember that when Jesus was born the shepherds in their field saw and heard the angels sing “peace on earth”; now we have a crowd of people singing “peace in heaven.”

It is fitting to sing a song of peace at the gates of Jerusalem, because the name of the city means “city of peace.” City of Shalom, Jeru-shalom.

The city is the home of the Temple, and the Temple is the centre of the Jewish world. It is the place where heaven and earth come together - the place of the presence of God.

This procession comes during the time of preparation for the Passover festival. The Passover is the Feast of Freedom when the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt is celebrated. Thousands of people will have made their pilgrimage to the holy city to celebrate.

Because of this large and sometimes unruly crowd, the Roman military authority, Pontious Pilate, is also present in the city to ensure order is kept.

While Jesus entered the city with his small but enthusiastic procession from the east, Pilate would have entered the city from the west in a rather grand and imposing procession composed of heavily armed Roman soldiers.

A festival of liberation might lead some to think about a new liberation from the Roman occupiers. Pilate is there with his soldiers to ensure public order is kept.

So when Jesus’ followers start singing about Jesus as their king, the Pharisees are freaking out: “tell your followers to stop shouting that! You’ll get us all killed!”

Jesus responds by pointing at the stones which make up the walls of the city and its Temple and says: "I tell you, if these (people) were silent, the stones would shout out."

Jesus is confident that he belongs in this city.

And he does belong. Our lectionary reading does not include this, but the first thing Jesus does when he enters the Temple is to drive out the merchants who were selling things there. He restores the Temple to be a "house of prayer."

Jesus takes his place in the Temple precinct and proceeds to teach and engage people in dialogue. The scribes and the elders keep trying to get him to say things which will be compromising or criminal, but Jesus says no such thing. When it comes to his trial before Pilate which we heard about in the Passion reading, the Temple authorities simply lie about Jesus and make baseless accusations against him.

Jesus is where he needs to be doing what he needs to do. He is well aware of the terrible price he will have to pay for simply proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

The way of the cross is costly for Jesus. Jesus' procession to Jerusalem and the cross is what makes Jesus more than merely a prophet or a teacher. Jesus is the one who entrusts everything to God, and invites us to do the same.

We are invited to join this procession on Palm Sunday, to join what the writer Amy-Jill Levine calls "a procession of justice, of compassion, of a vision of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom as God wants it to be."

May we join the procession today.