

A Curious Parade

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Palm Sunday

Every year, we hear a version of this reading for our Palm Sunday service, and every year, I find it perplexing. The readings seem straight forward. Jesus comes to Jerusalem, people are happy to see him, and they have a fine parade. And so, we remember that day by waving palm fronds and singing loud Hosannas. And we know that at the same time, the Roman army was having its own parade, with the governor Pontius Pilate arriving on a horse, surrounded by armed soldiers. Two parades, one peaceful, the other threatening violence.

But this is where Matthew makes things complicated. We're told very clearly that Christ comes riding in on a donkey colt. That means a young donkey, one that hasn't been broken in yet. Normally, this would be a terrible idea, a good way to get a concussion. But Matthew insists that we see that Jesus did this very deliberately. Matthew can see Jesus was deliberately fulfilling a prophecy from Zechariah. So, Matthew quotes from it.

The trouble is that if you read even a few more lines of that section of the prophecy, it declares very clearly that the Messiah has come to wage war. He's riding the colt of a donkey because the donkey represents the Gentile nations that need to be tamed and bridled – their will needs to be broken. The way the Messiah will do this is by waging war on them. The prophecy reads:

**he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.
... The Lord of hosts will protect them,
and they shall devour and tread down the slingers;
they shall drink their blood like wine....
(Zechariah 9:10;15)**

This peace will be bought through war and bloodshed. That's what the Messiah on a colt will do.

And here's where things get tricky. When the crowd sees Jesus on a colt, they think they are finally witnessing the approach of a warrior Messiah. So they sing Hosanna, which means, save us. But Jesus knows that isn't what will happen. He has no intention of starting a war. And Matthew knows that, too. And so do his earliest readers.

They have seen what happens when the Jews try to use violence against the Romans. They tried that 40 years after Jesus died. In the year 66, the Jews waged a rebellion against the Romans, and for three years it worked. They killed Roman soldiers and kicked them out of southern Israel. But

in the year 70 the empire strikes back.¹ Roman legions crushed the rebellion, destroyed the temple, killing hundreds of thousands of Jews².



Here's an image from an arch built in Rome to celebrate the victory. We see Roman soldiers carrying the sacred menorah from the Temple. In front of them, on the right, Jewish prisoners of war march with their hands tied behind their backs.



The wealth and slaves from this war were used to finance this building, the Roman coliseum, which is still a tourist attraction. It is a disaster for the Jewish people.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Siege-of-Jerusalem-70>

² <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1993/the-siege-of-jerusalem-in-70-ce/>

All of this happens 15 years before Matthew writes his gospel. So, when Matthew quotes from Zechariah, who predicts war, Matthew knows that violent resistance will not work. Matthew knows that Christ came riding in on that colt promising to tame the gentiles, but not through violence. Instead, Christ comes into Jerusalem on a colt promising that the way to peace comes by taming the human heart. It is what he has been teaching for three years, all over Galilee. Taming the human heart is the only way that world peace is possible, a peace that can reign from sea to sea.

Matthew is saying, what matters about Palm Sunday is not what the crowds on that day thought. They were wrong. They wanted war, not peace. What matters now is what **we** think Palm Sunday can mean. Are we ready to work for a kind of peace that starts in each human heart? Can we build peace from the inside out? Can we find a way to peace that does not rely on force, violence, and subjugation?

In the summer before the pandemic, I walked part of the Camino trail. The Camino is a Christian pilgrimage to the city of Santiago in Spain where legend has it, the bones of Saint James the apostle are buried. The word Camino means path, so there are many routes people take to walk to Santiago. My wife and I chose to come from the south, starting ten days away in Portugal. Like everyone else, we walked with knapsacks which contained one change of clothes, an extra pair of shoes, and some toiletries. That's it. Each night we sought shelter in auberges, which are basically hostels full of bunk beds for the tired pilgrims.

On day 7* of our pilgrimage, we crossed into Spain. Here's a picture of what the border looks like.*



It is simply a bridge, with a painted line on it in the middle.



We had fun jumping back and forth over the border.

I'm in Portugal, now I'm in Spain. There were no guards, no border crossing booths of any kind. We just walked into Spain. The food changed, the language changed, it was clearly a different country, with the best hot chocolate I had ever tasted in my life. But there was no barrier blocking these two countries. Just a painted line.

As we travelled, we bumped into mostly young people from all over Europe. Fortunately, most of them spoke English to some degree. We had dinner with 20 somethings from Germany, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Holland. You name it, they were there. We heard them snoring as they slept in their bunks, we shared tips on how to treat blisters. It was peace in action. Men and women from dozens of nations sharing the same roads, the same rooms and the same food, in a place with no borders.

In time, we may come to see the European Union as important as the pyramids or the invention of writing. One of the great achievements of human civilization. European history has been written in blood, so many wars, so many kings, queens and emperors determined to invade each other's lands for glory and plunder. It seems impossible that it would be this part of the world, with so much bloodshed and so many different languages that would become a borderless union. It is not perfect by any means. But it has achieved a degree of internal peace which in 1942 would have sounded like an impossible dream.

Just a little over a year ago, Putin decided to threaten that dream by invading Ukraine. Putin told his people that Ukraine was run by Nazis, the hated enemy of the Russian people. This lie gave Russian soldiers a blank cheque to treat Ukrainian soldiers and civilians with absolute cruelty, since in Russian eyes, Nazis are beasts who cannot be reasoned with. We know what has happened since. Russian troops have raped, killed, and tortured civilians and soldiers alike in the name of saving Ukraine from these supposed Nazis. This week, Putin was charged with a war crime, and there is a warrant for his arrest.

Today, on Palm Sunday, it is tempting to think that the two parades into Jerusalem are ancient history. That we are remembering a lovely event in Christ's life long ago. But Matthew wrote his account of the parade to remind us that those two parades are always happening. And one

requires a leap of imagination and faith. We are always faced by a choice between two ways of achieving peace on this planet. One promises peace through war and fear. The other teaches that it will only be by cultivating love for others that we can achieve peace. Peace from the inside out. Love for strangers who speak different languages, eat different foods, see the world differently. Love even for our enemies. A love that can see a real, redeemable human being even in a person who has blood on their hands. The kind of love and understanding that rebuilt Europe after World War Two. The kind of love that erased borders and enables people speaking dozens of different languages to be together without fear.

The Palm Sunday parade that matters is not the one that took place 2000 years ago, but the one that happens today. That first crowd was expecting a warrior, Messiah. We know they were mistaken. Christ took their expectations and turned them upside down. His way of love was what eventually conquered the Roman empire. Every generation faces the same struggle – to be blinded by hate or to embrace love and understanding. This work is never finished. Perhaps that is why they chose to wave palm branches that day, a symbol of immortality, of eternal life. Because this struggle between love and hate will go on until the end of the world. But we know that when it takes root, when people put aside their guns and hatred, the world can be transformed.

I saw what that could look like on the Camino. Strangers from all nations eating together, snoring together, walking together. We can tame our hatred, and others can, too. We can sing of peace and bring Christ's vision of peace from sea to sea closer to reality.

Amen.