

Sermon: “The procession and entourage of Jesus”
Palm Sunday A
Passion of St. Matthew

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The Gospel reading today tells a story. The Hymn that we sang before and after the reading also tells the story.

In fact, we didn’t have time to tell the whole story, either in song or in prose. The medieval church read the entire Passion history of Matthew, during the Liturgy, and of Mark, and of Luke, and of John during the days of this Holy Week. But we live in the age of sound bytes and tweets. I guess I should compare myself to a film maker of pilots or shorts, or treatments, because I only have the time with you to tell you part of the story. And I am always waiting, hoping that one day you will get to hear the entire feature-length story of the passion of Jesus.

Seven years ago, Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ*, which incidentally grossed some \$600 million dollars, covers only the last twelve hours of Jesus’ life, and takes 126 minutes to do it.

And although the events of this Palm Sunday “frame” all that is to come in this overwhelming story of Jesus, the triumphant entry into Jerusalem actually gets “short shrift” in our thinking most of the time. We seldom stop for a moment to think about this remarkable procession.

If you are an every-week Christian, or at least a *frequent* Christian, you know the story of Jesus as teacher, and healer, as the compassionate, itinerant rabbi who went from town to town all over the region of Galilee, and then Judea. In his public ministry, he gathered a following, not just of common folk, plain folk, but of people who were among the poorest and the most burdened. The ones who were sick, of course, but the ones who also were pushed to the margins of polite society because they were foreigners, outsiders—including tax collectors—and sinners—including a few prostitutes—that is, the people who made little pretense of “practicing” their official religion. In other words, his followers came from the less-successful, less-wealthy, less-powerful classes. And in that regard, it doesn’t seem unlike today, does it?

And as Jesus made his way toward the capital city, Jerusalem, he became something of a “folk hero.” He had touched so many lives, defended so many people who felt, perhaps that here was the first religious leader who understood them, did not reject them, and walked with them, no matter what! It is no wonder he attracted his following.

But the story which the Gospels tell is also quite clear that in becoming the friend of sinners, Jesus made quite a few enemies. He chose sides. As he turned toward the plain people of society, it was evident he was turning his back on power and influence, turning his back on strict religious observances—turning his back almost on religion itself in order to connect with people spiritually.

I mention this popular “following” because it literally explains the idea of this triumphant entry, this procession of people who followed Jesus from Galilee into Judea. And since the Passover was coming—many people would go up to Jerusalem on the Mountain of the Lord, Mount Zion, for the holy days—the gathering, the following or pilgrimage just grew.

But we cannot fully understand this procession until we know what it represented in the nation’s history. For Jesus gathered not just the poor, but gathered the hopes and the dreams of his people. He gathered the history of longing for redemption, for restoration; the history of national pride and yearning for another king like King David, another prophet like Elijah, another warrior like Joshua, another leader like Moses.

For Christians today, however, we do not merely see Jesus as the culmination of this long, long ancient procession of kings and prophets and leaders. We see him more at the center of the procession, because *since his time*, this procession has only grown longer: add to this procession the apostles, saints and martyrs, reformers of the church and renewers of society—all who have been drawn into the powerful entourage of Jesus who saw what he saw as the over-arching message of God’s love and compassion for the world; the entourage of all who believe that it is God’s will to change the world, to lift up the lowly, to welcome home the exile, to embrace the unlovable, and to reconcile those who are estranged.

But why these *enemies*? Why does this amazing, inspiring story have to be marred with the murky and evil deeds of enemies?

The answer, my friends, can be found in the daily newspapers or the internet’s blogs. It can be found in the world’s street banners and sometimes even graffiti. It is the yearning of all people to be free, and whole, and blessed, which always seems to threaten those who are holding the power and the influence already.

It is not surprising, is it, that people who hold political clout want to keep it. Or those who have all the military might want to hold on to their weapons. It is not surprising that the wealthy don’t want to part with their wealth, or to give it away to the poor who always seem to be poor.

But what is surprising is that the leaders of the world’s religions *are threatened* by upstarts or prophets or itinerants who try to expose their arrogance or phoniness. When it comes to matters of the human spirit, why is it that the respected voices who become priests and leaders and official spokesmen for God, should find themselves actually getting in the way of God? Time and time again in the Gospel story, Jesus is bucking up against this other group that is sometimes called the scribes and Pharisees, and then the chief priests. It is in this Holy Week, when *that* confrontation comes to a head. For it is not the people who wanted to end the procession, or to cut off the figure who had called them from every place in Galilee and Judea. It is the powerful, religious establishment: those who were already running the elaborate show in Jerusalem; those who controlled the inflow of cash, who sold the trinkets, who interpreted the rules and commandments, who could not stand the idea that Jesus could gather a following, a procession of common, poorly educated people, who thought *he* knew better than learned scholars and rabbis and chief priests.

It is tragic that this procession comes at length, in the course of this week, to the foot of the cross. But we should not be surprised that the authorities would have wanted to stop Jesus’ procession, his following, his “success story” because his entire message was built on showing ordinary people that they didn’t need the religious power structure in order to be “right with God.” Jesus dared to draw into his procession, by reference, ever ancient prophet *before* his time, especially those who decried injustice and hypocrisy and manipulative power.

Six hundred years before, the prophet Isaiah wrote: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, and sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” Jesus *dared* to quote this prophet when he first stood up in a local synagogue on the sabbath and chose to read those words out loud, as a declaration of war.

And it’s important to see why this inflamed the religious authorities: because the message of liberation implicitly drew attention to those who caused affliction, to those who caused broken-heartedness, to those who made captives of others, and those who built the prisons and wrote the laws to put people in them.

We can hardly think about undoing injustice, either in ancient times or in our own times, without

being very serious about who causes injustice.

In the late 18th century, a man named William Wilberforce began his political career in England, and became an independent member of Parliament. Wilberforce was convinced of the importance of religion, morality and education. But in 1785, William Wilberforce had a conversion experience and from then on identified himself as a Christian, which caused him to make great changes in his lifestyle. He is remembered today, not merely for becoming a believe, active Christian, but for becoming a driving force in Parliament to abolish the slave trade and the evil of human enslavement. Wilberforce did not give up easily, but neither did the lucrative systems of power. For it is one thing to say it is right that all human beings should be free. And it is another to say to the rich and powerful, “You must stop trying to enslave others, and you must let go of those whom you have enslaved.”

It took 26 years for William Wilberforce to win the passage of the Slave Trade Act of 1807 in Parliament, and another 6 years before the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. I note in passing that Wilberforce’s scope of compassion was wide, and among other things he championed the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

If we were keeping track of the procession of those who accompany and who follow Jesus, William Wilberforce would be among them. His influence is amazing, considering that in his lifetime he took on an ancient social institution, human slavery, and bit by bit convinced others to help him shut it down. Within thirty years of his death, the United States also came to shut it down, even having gone to war over the power and privilege of those who benefitted from the oppression of the afflicted, the heart-broken, and the captives.

Now, about you, my friends. Your assignment, if you choose to accept it, is to follow Jesus wherever there is oppression or affliction, or suffering, hunger, or captivity. In our congregation, we have undertaken to follow Jesus any way we can: to feed the hungry, every Tuesday (and we need your help with Easter baskets); to stand with those who want to recover from addiction—which rhymes with affliction; to challenge the prejudices and the control of the powerful over our hearts and consciences; and yes, even to help empty the prisons. We are not anarchists, as followers in the entourage of Jesus. If we can bring hope and courage and self-esteem to inmates, and guidance to those on parole, will it not serve to free people from their fate, lift people from their hopelessness, and create restorative justice in place of incarceration?

But your assignment is to follow Jesus *any way you can*. Some will follow him closely, and some only at a safer distance. You decide, as we enter into these astonishing events of the Week we call Holy. We know our way leads to the foot of the Cross, because we know that following Jesus is costly, and we will need to make sacrifices, and pay costs. We too may make enemies along the way, if we challenge those in high places, in order to raise those of low degree. But we need not fear we will lose our soul, for in that cross of Christ, he has redeemed and blessed all that we dare to undertake. In the Cross, Jesus has saved our soul and in his death he has given us life. Because we know what it means to be saved, to be released, to be raised up, to be redeemed and made whole. We know what healing is. We know the power of compassion, and the scope of mercy.

If we follow Jesus, my friends, we will have no doubt we are included in the wide embrace of God’s love—for that’s what we call Good News or Gospel. And in that wide embrace, we see the way to share it with anyone we know, anyone who carries a burden we can help to lift—for that is what we call Mission. Let’s roll! Amen?

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