

Year B Palm Sunday HTK the Rev'd Robert Holland

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday - the last Sunday of Lent and our gateway into the trials and triumphs of Holy Week and if your religious history looks anything like mine, you know the routine. We know how to make neat little crosses out palm branches. We know how to walk in an orderly procession, the lofty verses of *All glory Lord and honour* falling from our lips. We know how to cry Hosanna to your humble but triumphant king.

Palm Sunday has a cheery warmth about it. When I was young waving palm branches down the central aisle happy to know that after years of obscurity, ridicule and caution Jesus enjoyed had a fleeting but heartfelt outpouring of praise from his followers.

But history now tells us there were two processions that entered Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, the first came from the East side of the city the other from the West.

The procession that came from the West was the Roman governor of Judea who would ride up to Jerusalem each year from his coastal residence to be present in the city for Passover - the festival that swelled Jerusalem's population from its

usual 50,000 to at least 200,000. The governor would come in all his Imperial Majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome who was in charge.

That procession has been described in the following terms.

A visual panoply of Imperial power, cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds full: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers some curious, some bored, some resentful.

According to the Roman Imperial belief the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, he was the son of God. For the empire's Jewish subjects, the procession signalled more than a military theme, it was the embodiment of a rival theology. Heresy on horseback. And the governor, he was none other than Pontius Pilate.

On the opposite side of the city entering from the East was the so-called triumphal entry of Jesus of Nazareth, but this was no spontaneous event and Jesus was not the passive recipient of impromptu adoration. Though worship

might have happened, it was not the point. Rather there's a strong case to be made that Jesus' parade by donkey was a staged joke. It was an act of political theatre, an anti-imperialist demonstration designed to mock the obscene pomp and circumstance of Rome.

That Jesus planned a counter-procession is clear from Saint Mark's account of the event. Jesus knew he was going to enter the city on the back of a donkey; he had already made arrangements to procure one.

As Pilate clanged and crashed his Imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east looking by contrast ragtag and absurd. His was the procession of the ridiculous, the powerless, explicitly vulnerable. Some now describe what we often term the Triumphal Entry as an anti-imperial, anti-triumphal one, a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor entering a city on horseback through gates opened in abject submission.

Jesus of course rode the most unthreatening, most unmilitary mount imaginable, a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting beside her.

We have no idea, and the gospel writers don't tell us whether anyone in the crowd, let alone his disciples, understood what Jesus was really doing. Did they get the joke? Did they catch the subversive nature of their king's donkey ride? Jesus chose an animal that had never been ridden before. Was he telling them that his kingship, his way, was a new and uncharted one? A risky one? Did they hear him?

I suspect not, after all they were not interested in theatre; they were ripe for revolution. They wanted - and expected - something world-altering. An ending-of-the-story worthy of their worship, their fervour, their dusty-cloaks-on-the-road.

What they got instead was a parade of misfits. A comic donkey ride. A dangerous joke.

As the New Testament scholar Tom Wright puts it, what they got was a mismatch between their outsized expectations and God's small answer.

Which raises an interesting question. What did Jesus accomplish on Palm Sunday? Did a Roman officer from the real procession trot over to check out the

disturbance in the east? If so, what did he make of the seeming Clown King?

Did he turn his stallion around fast to whisper something ominous in Pilate's ear?

It's no exaggeration to suggest that Jesus' political joke probably hastened his crucifixion. Like all good comedians he understood that real humour is in fact a profoundly serious business; at its best, it does more than entertain. It points unflinchingly at truth - the kinds of truths we'd rather not see. The kinds of truth we'll kill not to see.

Many of us struggle to reconcile the role of God's will in the death of Jesus, this story offers a helpful but troubling clue: it was the will of God that Jesus declare the coming of God's kingdom. A kingdom of peace, a kingdom of justice, a kingdom of radical and universal freedom. A kingdom dramatically unlike the oppressive empire Jesus challenged on Palm Sunday. So why did Jesus die? He died because he unflinchingly fulfilled the will of God. He died because he exposed the ungracious sham at the heart of all human kingdoms, holding up a mirror that shocked his contemporaries at the deepest levels of their imagination.

Two processions. Two kingdoms. Two parades into Jerusalem. Stallion or donkey? Armour or humour? Emperor or clown? Which will we choose?