

Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday, Year A
April 26, 2011 ~ Matthew 27:11-54 & Philippians 2:5-11
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“The End, and The Beginning.”

Palm Sunday signaled the beginning of the end for Jesus. On Sunday, there was a festive procession into the city, but on Friday, there was a violent execution just outside the city walls. On Sunday, the excited crowds shouted “Hosanna!”, but on Friday a violent mob was shouting “Crucify him!” And, on Sunday, Jesus was adored, but on Friday, he had been abandoned. It was a difficult week.

And during those days, between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, the disciples argued about who was the greatest; one of his disciples, Judas, betrayed him, and then committed suicide; another of his disciples, Peter, denied ever knowing him; and all his disciples fled for the high ground — well, except for the women.

And so, after three years of ministry, after three years of preaching, teaching, and healing, after three years of reaching out to the poor, the imprisoned, and the blind: his family declared Jesus insane; the religious establishment hated him; and the political authorities were fed up with him.

Therefore, Rome did what it had to do, to crush what it thought was a movement of insurgents. Jesus was arrested, interrogated, and tortured; mocked, humiliated, and then, finally, executed.

One scholar has described crucifixion as a sadistic execution, designed to be a “calculated social deterrent” for any other trouble-makers who might want to challenge imperial authority, and disturb the peace.

But why did Jesus have to die?

According to Luke’s gospel, Jesus was executed for three reasons: “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king” (Luke 23:1-2). And, according to John’s gospel, the angry mob warned Pilate, “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor” (John 19:12).

In short, Jesus was accused of being a subversive, who threatened to undermine the political and religious status quo. And though I used to believe that the charges were entirely made up, I'm beginning to believe that his accusers were more right than they knew, or could have imagined.

In their recent book, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan suggest that the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem was intended to be "deeply ironic, highly symbolic, and deliberately provocative." In other words, it was more of a "planned political demonstration" than the religious celebration that we so often reenact today.

And how does that work? Well, the Romans always made a show of force during the annual Jewish Passover, and scholars are beginning to believe that there was not just one procession entering Jerusalem that Palm Sunday morning, but two; two politically-motivated processions.

Approaching Jerusalem from the west, Pilate, the Roman governor, entered the city with all the pomp of state power. However, and at approximately the same time, Jesus descended the Mount of Olives and entered Jerusalem from the east. It was not only a bold parody of imperial politics — and, perhaps, a foolishly dangerous parody — but it was also the fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah, which we heard during the Liturgy of the Palms.

Pilate's procession into Jerusalem showcased Rome's power, glory, and military might. However, and in stark contrast, Jesus' entry was an anti-imperial, and anti-triumphal counter-procession of peasants, that showcased an that community that, for three years, Jesus had called "the kingdom of God."

So, if Jesus and his followers were subversives, what were they trying to subvert?

I tend to believe that what Jesus was doing, teaching, and preaching challenged major aspects of the way so many societies in history have been organized. Whether ancient or modern, too many societies have simply accepted the political oppression and marginalization of ordinary people; they've accepted the economic exploitation of the poor by the rich; and they've encouraged those religious groups who, in effect, say to those who have been oppressed, marginalized, and exploited, "Don't try to change things, because God wants things this way."

These are the things that Jesus was fighting against, and, on Palm Sunday, he invites us to join his subversive counter-procession. And in our own society, it's easy to imagine Jesus leading us to work against things like: ethnic and religious stereotyping; the use of the media to spread political propaganda; the discrimination of women; unchecked consumerism; and, our waste of natural resources. It's easy to know what Jesus would have us do about these things.

But how do we go about it?

In one of the earliest known Christian hymns, which we heard in our reading from Philippians, first-century believers worshiped Jesus as one who,

“though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

In other words, dying to self, and living to serve others, is a good place to start being a subversive for God.

When we truly identify with Jesus, and pattern our lives after his, there will be endless opportunities for subversions, like encouraging people to share their wealth, rather than simply accumulate it; to be in the business of renouncing, rather than gratifying, the desires of the flesh; to be more about self-sacrifice, rather than self-satisfaction; to be about humility, rather than exaltation; and to be about peace for all, rather than security for only a few. These are just a few ways we can be God's subversives; these are just a few ways we can become a part of Jesus' counter-procession, though I suppose you can imagine a few more.

And so, although Palm Sunday marked the beginning of the end for Jesus, his end showed the way for our own beginning.