

March 28, 2021
Palm Sunday

Meditation: "What a Parade!"

It was ten days before the most sacred of the Jewish holy days; ten more days until they celebrated Passover, one of their three pilgrimage holy days. It was one of three days in the Jewish year that Jews from miles around made their way into the city of Jerusalem, and up to the temple to celebrate. Their ranks would swell the population of Jerusalem from 40,000 to somewhere around 250,000. The garrison at Fortress Antonia, overlooking the temple, could not hope to quell any unrest on their own, and so Pilate was preparing troops in Caesarea Maritima (Caesar on the Sea) for the march into Jerusalem to reinforce the garrison there.

It was lovely here in Caesarea Maritima. The climate was fair and the view of the Mediterranean was breathtaking. He hated the thought of having to go inland to the dreary, isolated backwater that was Jerusalem, but he had no choice but to leave his main residence here for the three holy days of the Jews when they ascended to Jerusalem en masse.

It was 60 miles inland to Jerusalem, due east, and uphill. It would be a good two day march, but Pilate wanted to stop just short of the city on the second day, so that they could march into the city early on the Sunday, the troops looking fresh and rested, the people bustling about the city. He wanted to make an impression. Rome was the greatest empire the world had ever seen, and he wanted the Jews to know who was in charge. Rome dominated them, and they owed tribute to support the empire. The buffoons that ran the temple were responsible to ensure that taxes were collected so that tribute could be paid. Caesar was God, not some invisible, imaginary being, holed up in some back closet in the temple. He, Pilate, would show them.

Jesus and his followers had travelled a little over 90 miles south from Galilee, and now they were at the mount of Olives, just east of Jerusalem. Olivet is higher than the temple mount, and so they stood looking down at the temple, directly west of them. There were so many people in the city already. There was no way a human voice could reach every ear, especially with all of the commotion there would be. Actions speak louder than words, the old saying went. This was not a time for words that wouldn't be heard. This was a time for some street theatre, complete with symbols the people could not fail to understand.

Jesus' thoughts turned to the time when King David had entered the city after defeating the Jebusites. David's rule was remembered as one of power and glory by the people, and it was also remembered as a time when there was justice and righteousness in the land. The prophet Zechariah spoke of a time when a new king, a descendant of David, would come and stand on this very spot. The Messiah, Salvation, would come from the east. Zechariah wrote these words, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem;

and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.” That was the dreamed for time, the hope of the Jewish people; a leader, a messiah, who would usher in a time of justice and peace; a time when there would be no more political or economic domination legitimated by religion; a time when there would be no more armies or soldiers or weapons of war. It was time for his disciples to go and fetch the colt, for only a colt that had never before been ridden would be acceptable for sacred use.

Sunday morning the soldiers were up early polishing their leather armour and their weapons, wiping off the dust of a two day march. They put on their armour and strapped on their swords. They picked up their banners and the golden eagles mounted on poles and their drums. They mounted their horses and formed into lines, and leading them all was Pilate seated on a stallion, announcing his military superiority over these ignorant peasants he ruled over. They headed east into the city, entering by the western gate. The sounds of hundreds of horses, creaking leather, the clink of metal, followed by thousands of soldiers marching, the beating of drums. The sun glinting off the golden eagles, the swirling of dust as they marched through the city gates early in the day. The people in the city could not help but notice the long procession of thousands of cavalry and foot soldiers as they entered the city in a show of force. Some were curious, others in awe, most resentful of the Roman presence in the holy city, especially at the start of this holiest of weeks.

On the opposite side of the city, coming from the east, there was another procession. A peasant seated on a donkey, an animal that announced the rider as royalty, and at the same time announced the rider’s peaceful intent. He came riding in from Olivet, the place the Messiah was to come from. Thousands of peasants strewed palm branches and their garments on the road before him, welcoming the true and hoped for king, the messiah that Zechariah had foretold, and announcing their fealty to him. There were shouts, a royal acclamation really, “Hosanna! Which literally means, ‘Save Us!’ Save us from the foreigners who have occupied our land! Save us from the temple rulers who justify the occupation, steal our land, and take our money to give to the Romans! Save us! Hosanna!” This was an enthronement procession. In all of history, never before, and never since was there such a political rally against injustice.

The so-called Freedom Rallies promoted and attended by Pastor Henry Hildebrandt claim to be rallies opposed to so-called political injustices. They draw thousands of people upset by public health orders that they say infringe on their absolute, God-given right to freedom of religious expression. What they fail to recognize is that the virus does not recognize their human rights. What they fail to say is that rights are human creations. What they fail to say is that rights have limits. What they fail to say is that, even in the constitution, there are limits to our rights. What is more important, individual rights, or community? Public health orders, rightly I believe, put the lives of the many ahead of individual freedoms. And public health orders are not permanent. They shall pass along with the danger they are protecting us from. The pastor appears to be trying to capitalize on an opportunity to swell the ranks of his church, which he says is not a denomination, but the one and only true church of disciples of

God. He says that at the end of time, the ranks of the church will swell, and Jesus will come again and take the true believers to heaven, and the rest will be condemned to eternal damnation. I wonder, does he believe that he can hasten the end by swelling the ranks of his followers? There's a word for thinking you can force God's hand – hubris.

And what do I say? I say that the Bible is not the ultimate authority, Jesus is. We are, after all, called Christians, not Biblians. Let's stick with the Bible for a minute. The Bible, time and again, shows that God's preference is for the vulnerable and the marginalized: the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, the ritually unclean (the leper, the demon possessed, those who have come into contact with blood) and so on. Jesus told us, the greatest commandment is to love God, and the second greatest is to love our neighbour as ourselves. I fail to understand how putting the health of your flock, and the wider community at risk is protecting the vulnerable or loving your neighbour. I believe that community wholeness takes precedence over individual desires, after all, I believe that God created us to be in community with. And the end of time? I believe that end does not refer to a point, such as sunset is the end of the day. I believe that the end being referred to is the Greek word telos, which means the goal, the aim, the objective of time, and that goal is the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God, I believe, is a future thing, but also a thing of this world, this creation, and not somewhere else. The kingdom of God is what this world would look like if God were in charge, and not Henry Hildebrandt or Joe Biden or Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping or any other political ruler.

There are so many conflicts in this world, where two opposing views are struggling for supremacy. Those opposed to public health orders, and those in favour of them. The masses in Myanmar who want the military to restore their democratically elected leader, and the military junta that wants to hold power. Those whose sole concern is the accumulation of wealth, regardless the costs involved, and those who seek to preserve life on this planet. Those who want to stop or slow climate change, and those who want the status quo to continue; a status quo that gives them a great deal of wealth and power and political control. And isn't that what so much of this is all about: power and control. What are people willing to do to get power? What will people do with power when they get it?

Both processions were headed for the temple. A showdown was coming, soon. You may think that the showdown happened a long time ago, once and for all, but you would be wrong. The showdown is here. The showdown is still coming. You see, we are not called to be spectators to a parade, but participants. We are not called to witness something and then go home, but to commit to what we've seen. The question is, which parade will you join, which ideology will you embrace, which God will you serve?