

Matthew 21:1-11 Palm Sunday

April 2, 2023

Psalm 118: 1, 21-29

Procession of Hope

Auspicious Entry

History tells many stories ... the good, the bad, and the ugly and the strange. All of them instructive in some manner. Consider this one from recent history: On December 5, 1977, Jean-Bedel Bokassa crowned himself Emperor Bokassa I of the Central African Empire. At 10:10 a.m., trumpets and drums announced the approach of His Majesty. The beginning of the parade had eight of Bokassa's 29 official children proceed down the royal carpet to their seats. They were followed by the heir to the throne, Jean Bedel Bokassa II -- dressed in a white admiral's uniform with gold braid. He was seated on a red pillow to the left of the throne. Bokassa I's favorite wife, Catherine, one of nine of his wives, paraded next to her throne wearing a \$73,000 gown that was hand sewn with pearls.

Bokassa I then arrived in an imperial coach decorated with golden eagles. His coach was drawn by six matched Anglo-Norman horses. The Central African Empire Marine Band struck up the hymn "The Sacred March of His Majesty," a song written especially for the event. Emperor Bokassa I strutted proudly to his throne. He was bedecked in a 32 pound robe decorated with 785,000 strewn pearls and embroidered in gold. The emperor wore white gloves and pearl slippers on his feet. On his head, he wore a gold crown of laurel-wreaths, similar to those worn by Roman consuls of old and a symbol that he was favored by the gods.

As the "Sacred March" ended, Bokassa I seated himself on his \$2.5 million eagle throne. He took his gold laurel wreath off and placed a crown on his own head that contained a seventy-carat diamond in the shape of Africa. The lavish coronation ceremony cost \$200 million and all but ruined the country's economy.

Contrast that with this historical account about another king's entrance: Almost 2,000 years ago, one man made an entry into the ancient city of Jerusalem. Although He was not yet a household name, He was known to many in Israel as a man of God - a prophet. Rumor and reports of His teaching and wondrous deeds preceded Him to nation's capitol. [We know that He visited Jerusalem as a boy, with His parents, and He may well have been in the city more than once, as an adult.]

He entered the city from the Mt. of Olives, echoing the prophecy, from long ago, of the prophet Zechariah who had described how the Lord will stand on the Mount of Olives on the last day. He entered town on a donkey, just as Zechariah had said, **See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey... Zechariah 14:4** The crowds paved the way for Jesus with cloaks and branches, as they had centuries earlier for Solomon (son of King David – 1 Kings 1:32-37), for Jehu (2 Kings 9:13), Simon and Judas Maccabeus (1 Macc. 13:51; 2 Macc. 10:7). It was the ancient version of "rolling out the red carpet." [We call this Palm Sunday but did you know that palms are mentioned only in John's gospel – "branches of the palm trees"? Matthew says, "coats" and "branches from trees;" Mark says "coats" and "leafy branches cut from the fields;" Luke says, "coats."]

He entered the holy city at a time when all was not well in the capital and the country. People knew that they were under foreign occupation. As observant Jews came to Jerusalem for Passover celebrations they saw Roman soldiers and symbols that reminded them that foreigners, who did not believe in mighty God, were in control. Some tried to ignore it and found ways to get along. Others indulged their selfish ambition by collaborating with the Romans. Still others felt the Roman presence was intolerable – some for political or economic reasons, and others for religious reasons.

Reports and rumors had already crisscrossed the nation about this fellow Jesus of Nazareth. Some said He was telling His fellow Jews that very soon the Lord God would be coming to them in a powerful way. He said the Lord God would come to rule over them (in the kingdom of God). Many believed He meant that the oppressive, pagan, Romans would be ousted. By the time He entered Jerusalem, **Jesus had become not only a religious leader, but many also saw Him as a political leader** as well.

In their acclamation the people repeated words found in Psalm 118 (vs. 25-26), the last Hallel psalm sung at Passover. “Hosanna” was originally a prayer: “Save, we beseech you.” But by the time of Jesus it was more of a festive shout, something like a religious “hurrah.” Kind of like how “good-bye” used to be a prayer: “God be with you.” **“Blessed is the one who comes” (Psalm 118:26) originally referred to one who comes to worship at the Temple.** By Jesus’ time it had messianic overtones – and on this day it was applied to Jesus with royal overtones, as He was called “son of David.”

This was a procession of hope; and in the minds of many, a religious and political pilgrimage. It was a bold and joyous demonstration for the Lord and a proclamation of hope for those who were oppressed. Our Lenten season cannot really be complete unless we also in some way participate in a joyous celebration of hope on this Sunday prior to Good Friday. For us also it is a hope for liberty, for release from sins that bind us, ours and those of others. Nevertheless, our hope will likely go through experiences of discouragement or despair before we and others are truly set free.

People in the city were stirred and asked, “Who is this?” Perhaps there were folks from Galilee, Jesus’ home state, who identified Him for residents of Jerusalem. They named Him a prophet and shouted “Hosanna to the son of David!” They used all the right words ... but did they miss amost important point? Did they miss the point that **He rode in on a donkey ... as opposed to a war horse or chariot?** *See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey...* Little did the crowd realize that His kingdom would be advertised on a cross rather than from a palace.

Those who waved palm branches spoke the truth, yet they themselves failed to perceive what that truth really was. The “Hosannas” of the beginning of the week were echoed by shouts of “Crucify him!” before week’s end.

Self-Control in a Crowd

It took great self-control on the part of Jesus to keep His head in the jubilant crowd (He was human in every way we are). **He could have been swayed by the crowd to trade in His donkey for a fine steed and ride in like a great warrior,** like King David, the greatest king of Israel. Jesus could easily have been carried away by all the enthusiasm and marched right to ole King Herod’s palace and demanded He vacate the throne. It was almost as if the Devil had returned with a happy face, once again

tempting Jesus, as He had in the desert; tempting Him to be a great liberator and king in the way everyone expected.

Years ago theologian Reinhold Niehbur wrote an insightful book: *Moral Man, Immoral Society*. In it he shows how moral individuals will often do immoral things when in a crowd. Without powerful self-control they are easily swayed by the mood of the mob. **Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control, Proverbs 25:28.** Aren't there signs of this all around us? There's gang violence, domestic abuse, substance abuse and power abuse, drug overdoses, massive government debt, terrible inflation, sexual deviance normalized, scenes of teenagers on a rampage, fighting, looting, destroying. I'm sure you can name other examples. **Our society is fraught with problems brought on by unrestrained self-indulgence.** You don't have to be a conservative or liberal to see this. Lack of self-control kills self respect, kills friendships, marriages, careers, and ministries. None of us can boast that we've always and everywhere exercised self-control – how many words have flown from your mouth that you wished you could call back? How many deeds have you done that you wish you could undo?

The Greek word in the Bible for self-control *ἐγκράτεια*. It means restraining passions and appetites. It is the opposite of self-indulgence and excess. **Anyone who has self-control is a mighty warrior. Anyone who lacks self-control is an accident waiting to happen or a slave in chains.** Wouldn't it be great if salvation and self-control were simultaneous? But they're not. Believers continue to struggle with self-control, but thanks be to God He gives us Holy Spirit help to attain it.

Living by the Spirit Jesus exercised self-control and was not consumed by the enthusiasm of the crowd. It works the same way for us. Have you seriously spent enough time in the Lord's presence to allow the Holy Spirit to shape your character and behaviors? **Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free, John 8:32.** Jesus exercised self-control because He knew what He was called by God to do and He called upon God for strength to do it. Who among us has recognized God's call on our life and called upon God for the strength to obey Him?

Who Is Successful?

How do you define success? Lots of money? Power? Completion of education? List of accomplishments? Good family? People chanted, waved, and hailed Jesus as heaven sent. By all external measures that day was a successful one for Him. Yet **success is a terribly imprecise and elusive business.** The familiar occasion of Palm Sunday ought to prompt us to think about the subject of success. We need to be clear about our definition of success lest it become even more elusive. Many of us may know the burden of having to live up to other people's definitions of success for us. Jesus knew this; but He also knew who He was and where He was going. His triumphal entry was an ironic event, for by the end of that very successful week He was condemned to death. But this was not a failure for Him.

The boisterous crowd acclaimed Him to be the one to deliver the people of Israel from their oppression. There were shouts and slogans... But Jesus knew that His destiny was to be the Messiah described by the prophet Isaiah as suffering servant. **If you want a picture of success, as heaven measures it, don't listen for blaring bands on**

Broadway. Listen rather to the sound of water splashing into a basin while God incarnate, in a humility that makes angels hold their breath, sponges the grime from the feet of His undeserving disciples.¹

My friends, Christ Jesus, though one with God the Father, took the form of a servant, and humbled Himself, even to the point of death on the cross. This was His mission – a mission that saves you and me from the prison of self-indulgence; a life apart from God; which is sin. (If you think you're already good enough you've not recognized truth.) It's not about us, it's about Him and what He's done for us. Glory to God in the highest!

Neither you nor I need to be another messiah, or construct the kingdom of God on our own accord; but **we can do our part to help Jesus ride into our midst...** into our lives, our homes, our neighborhoods, and into our town. Are you doing that? Have you carried Him to others? Are you willing to be the donkey He rides in on?

When we know and love God, living in harmony with His purpose for our lives, we will be helping to usher in the kingdom of God. That's the greatest success you can achieve in life. Success is doing what God has shaped you to do.

Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He who brings us deliverance and strength to obey God.

¹ Dr. Paul Reese