

Prayer of the Week:

Almighty and everlasting God, in your tender love for us you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon himself our nature, and to suffer death upon the Cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and come to share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(Source: Book of Common Prayer 2019, Collects of the Christian Year, Palm Sunday)

Prayer of Thanksgiving:

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made.

We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.



Alterna Civitas
Luke 19:28-44 (NRSV)
April 5, 2020

Intro

Palm Sunday presents us with a unique opportunity. On one level we can look at the events of Palm Sunday and understand them at the surface level; a remembrance of Jesus' ride into Jerusalem on a donkey.

However, when we consider the events of Palm Sunday in context, it speaks to us deeply about the relationship between the Church and the State.

The Parade In It's World

When the praises ringing out in streets just outside of Jerusalem in honor of Jesus got too loud the Pharisees told Jesus to rebuke the crowd in order to quiet them down. They did this because they were worried that the Caesar would be threatened by the praise offered to Jesus. Raising too much of a raucous could be seen as revolutionary act against Rome.

As the parade crested the hill, Jesus began to weep and said, "If only you knew, on this day of all the days, the things that lead to peace. But you can't see. A time will come when your enemies will surround you, crush you, and level the city leaving no stone unturned."

Jesus knew that they wouldn't quite understand the significance of the day, that moment. His message of peace would not be received by a people consumed by ways of empire....and it broke his heart.

Remember, this is a mostly Jewish audience. They knew the prophets well. Image a few there that day that realized the full drama of the moment by remembering the words of the prophet Zechariah (Zechariah 9:9-10),

"9 Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you,

righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey..."

10 "I will take away the chariots from Ephraim

and the warhorses from Jerusalem,

and the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea

and from the River to the ends of the earth."

The Palm Sunday parade is a parallel alternative to the parade of Pilate. In the same way, the Church is to be a parallel alternative city to Rome.

The Church As An Alternative City

The general term for how any society organizes their lives together is "politics." Politics is nothing more than seeking to answer the core question, "How do we organize our shared life together?"

Empire is a kind of "politic." That is; ways of life, concepts of city and citizenship, and commonwealth. It has a mode of operation that demonstrates who is valuable and who is not; what matters most and what does not.

The Church is also a "politic." The Church must be ready to challenge the prevailing assumptions about the life of empire because of their allegiance to Jesus as King. The Church is to develop new ways of organizing our lives together based on the kingdom of God and the teaching of Jesus. In this way, the life of the Church is ALWAYS political.

This is part of the subtext of the Palm Sunday passage! Jesus did not ride into Jerusalem on a donkey because it was the most efficient mode of transportation, he thought it would be cute, or good marketing for his cause. He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to directly call into question the empire's politic and offer an alternative. It was the very thing his life had been about to that point and a fitting beginning to a week in Jerusalem that would end in his death at the hand of empire and culminate in resurrection. His life, death, and resurrection all demonstrate the alternative politic that the Church is to be about! The way of self-sacrificial love!

Approaching Politics

As people of faith, we are caught trying to navigate a politically divided world. And a number of approaches have been suggested:

One approach is to say that faith and politics should never intersect. To do this would be to do the very thing our ancient brothers and sisters in faith refused to do! They did not want to turn Jesus and his message into just another religion about a peaceful afterlife. Certainly the message of Christianity includes that, but it is so much more than that! Jesus had real ideas about how to organize our lives together. Which is to say, Jesus had “political” ideas.

Another approach is to assume that faith and partisan politics should be conflated into one. Unfortunately, much of American Church has done exactly this by attaching themselves to partisan politics and assumed that everything a particular political party does is most in line with the message of Christ. (This is true on both sides of political ideology). You can be certain that if you assume that either side of the American political spectrum fully captures the message of Christ and His Kingdom then you have a deeply compromised faith.

A third approach is Political Theology. Political theology takes the politics of empire and seeks to evaluate it theologically. You look at any given policy, practice, or law and evaluate it through the eyes of the kingdom of God. This is a decent solution. If large portions of the American Church would do this honestly we would be better for it!

There is a better alternative. A fourth option called Theological Politics. Instead of trying to look at politics through a theological lens, theological politics start with the conviction that "the Church is to be an alternative city

shaped by the ways of Jesus and formed around the confession that Jesus is LORD.” From there, we work out our political lives and convictions.

The difference is this: We aren’t trying to take empire politics and evaluate (although that’s important), we are taking our theology and building a politic (way of organizing ourselves) out of that.

Jesus’ shorthand way of talking about this is “the kingdom of God.”

My encouragement to us is to make sure we take our cues on what is best for our world from Jesus, not Caesar!

Conclusion

Early Christians living in the Roman empire were so formed by the ways of the kingdom that people were drawn to their lives. Author Alan Kreider says in his book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, ***“their reflexes and ways of life suggested that there was another way to perceive reality - that made the Christians interesting, challenging, and worth investigating.”***

In a world full of fear, hate-speech, and division, let’s be interesting, challenging, and worth investigating!