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AN EASTER TRILOGY (Part 1)

Palm Sunday: The Donald or the Donkey

This Sunday is Palm Sunday commemorating the day in which Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the adulation of the multitudes crying out “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 21:9).

However, this was not the only procession to enter Jerusalem on that Passover. Since hundreds of thousands of pilgrims packed Jerusalem every year for this holiest of Jewish festivals, the present contingent of Roman troops was heavily reinforced in order to insure and enforce Roman peace. In usual Roman fashion, these soldiers entered the city with a display of splendor, pomp and ceremony. They escorted the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, from his official residence at Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast in the west to Jerusalem.

Catch a picture of the despised Roman army as it enters the Holy City. The Roman officers are riding their warhorses. The infantry is marching in rhythmic precision. Brass helmets and breastplates glisten in the sun. The official emblem, the Roman eagles (a despised symbol of idolatry to the Jews), are carried high on their standards. The pounding of horses hoofs and the pulsating tromp of marching soldiers reverberates throughout the city echoing off the city walls. The beating of Roman drums, the clanging of brass armor and swords, the clanging of horses bridles***, and the squeaking of leather saddles—all together make an impressive sight and sound. It was intended so.

The army was garrisoned at the Fortress of Antonio in downtown Jerusalem, directly adjacent to the northwest corner of the Temple Court.

The entire procession was an intimidating display of Roman power, authority, and might, a none-too-subtle warning to the swollen population of Jerusalem not to incur Roman wrath. To do so would be disastrous as they would learn some forty years later in 70 A.D. when the Roman General Titus marched three Roman legions into Jerusalem burning and plundering the entire city with “frightful carnage.” Historian Josephus writes that the Roman army crucified so many Jews that there was not space enough for the crosses or enough crosses for the bodies.

Since this parade of Roman troops into the city happened every year at Passover, Jesus would have known about it.

Why then did Jesus deliberately orchestrate His own entrance into the city for the very same week, perhaps on the very same day that the Roman army entered the city?

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) are clear that the event was carefully planned (Matthew 21:2-3). But why? Some have suggested that He was tired or that He had sprained his ankle or He wanted to be high up so the people could see Him. The timing and manner of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem was far more significant than these silly suggestions.

What Jesus did on Palm Sunday was known as a “prophetic act,” a type of “street theater.” Prophetic acts were public demonstrations acting out an important message. These acts had a rich history among the great prophets of Israel. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all used prophetic acts to reinforce their message to a people who weren’t listening to their words. Jesus was now doing the same thing.

Jesus planned His Palm Sunday demonstration to be a dramatic contrast to the entrance of the Roman army into Jerusalem. The juxtaposition of these two entrances into Jerusalem could not have formed a more stark contrast: the Roman Army entering the city from the West riding warhorses and Jesus entering from the East (tradition said Messiah would come from the East) and riding a donkey (a symbol for a Hebrew king).

The contrast is between the ways of Rome and the ways of God, the world’s way and God’s way. Jesus is proffering a contrast between two ways of life, two kingdoms, and two kings.

Rome’s way, the world’s way, is the way of domination and oppression. God’s way is the way of gentleness and compassion. The world’s way is the way of intimidation and coercion; God’s way is the way of humility and reconciliation. The world’s way is the way of force; God’s way is the way of freedom. The world’s way is revenge; God’s way is forgiveness. The world’s way is war; God’s way is peace. The world’s way is hatred; God’s way is love.



This contrast remains with us today. The challenge of Palm Sunday is: will we live according to the world's way or will we deliberately chose to live God's way?

Don't you think that Christians should at least try to act Christian, that is, like Christ? I know that Christ-likeness is not a popular model for our time (or any time for that matter). We admire The Donald with his scowl, his overbearing demeanor, his unforgiving demands, and his brusque, "You're fired!" It makes good theater and millions tune in every week. The Donald is so American after all, and Jesus is... well... Jesus.

The contrast is between living like the world and living with the virtues and values of the kingdom of God. Will we be God's people living with Godlike virtues or will we live like the unregenerate world? Will we be people of love or of hate, people of peace or of war, people who forgive or who exact vengeance? Will we be kind or rude? (Mark Twain's prayer through one of his characters was, "God, make the bad people good and the good people nice." Shouldn't Christian people be nice?) Will we live by the teachings of Jesus or by popular expediency?

Throughout the day we make decisions about how we treat other people. Every day we choose to be petulant and argumentative or we choose to be peacemakers. We choose the world's way of ugliness or God's way of kindness. We are haughty or humble. We choose to love or to hate. We choose to be people in whom the Kingdom of God is present and through whom His Kingdom is extended and expressed to others, or we choose to perpetuate the hatred, bitterness, unforgiveness, and anger and exacerbate the conflicts and little wars all around us.

You and I may not have much influence on the foreign and military policies of the United States, but we do decide how we will live, how we will relate to others, what our own actions, reactions, attitudes, and words will be.

In addition to believing in Jesus, Christian people should follow Jesus, shouldn't we? The choice is ours. This is the challenge of Palm Sunday: Rome's way or God's way. The way of The Donald or the way of the donkey. Unsettling, isn't it?

And because of the grace of God we really do have a choice. Have you ever thought, "I really want to forgive, but I can't"? Or, "I want to have peace, but I don't." "I want to love, but I am hateful, mean, and ugly."

God doesn't expect us to be something that we are not. He knows that won't work for long. This is the reason for

regeneration. We need and can have new life. He makes it possible.

It's just not as simple as saying, "Today I am going to be different. I'm going to stop hating and start loving. I'm going to forgive rather than take revenge. I'm going to be kind rather than mean, cooperative rather than obstinate, be a peacemaker rather than a troublemaker."

It's not that that's wrong. It's just shallow; it won't work. I wish it were that easy, but it's not. Where does the capacity, the ability to live God's way come from? It comes directly from God. As we know God's love (by "know" I mean the full Semitic concept of knowing both intellectually and experientially), we are enabled to love. Through experiencing God's love, God pouring His love into my life, I am able to love others in return. By knowing God's forgiveness I am able to forgive. In knowing God's kindness I can be kind. It is through experiencing God's kindness, peace, goodness, mercy and grace that I can be kind, peaceful, good, merciful and gracious to others.

The choice is ours: Rome's way or God's way. When we seriously choose God's way, God's kingdom and make God our King, He pours His life into us and we can be Kingdom people, people in whom the Kingdom of God dwells and through whom the Kingdom of God is extended to others in our world. This is the significance of Palm Sunday.

Grace be with you,
Steve Johnson

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