

The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

Palm Sunday Friday, Year C
8:00 a.m. & 10:30 p.m.
April 13, 2025

“Save Us Now”

This is a difficult Sunday to preach, because we are trying to do two things at once. The tradition is that Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week. We enter Jerusalem with Jesus and the disciples. We experience the cheering crowds welcoming Jesus on his donkey. We know he is headed into Jerusalem to cleanse the Temple. There will be many other events in the next seven days. For the moment, we can exult in the celebration and the excitement of the triumphal entry while we wave our palm branches and sing “All glory laud and honor.” There are no flowers or alleluias, it is still a much more festive day than any other in Lent.

But the modern world’s focus on incessant work and busyness has led the Church to make a significant adjustment to Palm Sunday. While your bulletin reads Palm Sunday, officially, the Church calls it Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday. Therefore, we are supposed to jump from the triumphal entry right into the Last Supper, trial, and crucifixion. It is a lot of emotional and theological ground to cover in one hour of church, much less ten minutes of a sermon.

There is so much packed into this week that cries out for thought and discussion. What should we focus on? There are the cleansing of the Temple, the Last Supper, his betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion on Good Friday, culminating in his resurrection on Easter Sunday

As we walked into church today in our imitation of Jesus’ Triumphal procession into Jerusalem almost two thousand years ago, we waved our palm fronds, sang a hymn that spoke of “sweet hosannas” ringing from the lips of children. Does anyone know what *hosanna*, a Hebrew word, means in English? I think many people, including the hymnist, think it means praise to God, honor, glory to God, or a simple shout of joy. However, *hosanna* translates to “save us now.” That is quite different from what I used to think it meant.

Most of the time, when we sing or say Hosanna, we do not get this sense of the word. It is interesting that the song “Hosanna” from the rock opera “Jesus Christ Superstar” does give us this sense in the later verses. As the people process into Jerusalem, they initially sing, “Hey JC, JC you’re all right by me ...” but later that changes to, “Hey JC, JC won’t you fight for me...” and then later, “Hey JC, JC, won’t you die for me...” For all that is not theologically correct about the musical in this instance, they hit it squarely on the head.

“Save us now” is not a cry for religious salvation, but freedom from political oppression. The people with their shouts of Hosanna are not praising anything. In the musical and in the Bible, they are asking for Jesus to save them from the oppression of the Roman Empire and the religious establishment that cooperates with the Romans. The people want a revolution that will reestablish Israel as a self-ruling country. That is why they are excited about Jesus coming to Jerusalem.

Jesus’ action of riding into the city on a donkey plays into that. The donkey is not a symbol of humility. He is copying King David’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The people took this as a sign that Jesus would be the new King in the mold of David. They had been anticipating such a king for centuries.

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It is no wonder that by the week's end, the crowds were calling for Pilate to execute Jesus. He had not fulfilled their expectations. He was teaching and preaching but he was not firing up the population to revolt. People expected more than parables and vague apocalyptic sayings. They wanted rabble-rousing speeches and a call to arms.

When Pilate gave them a choice of freeing Jesus or Barrabas, perhaps they wanted Barrabas because he had been arrested for fomenting an uprising. They were in the mood for that, so they asked for him. Of course, it is surprising that Pilate was foolish enough to free such a person. But if people were calling Jesus the King of the Jews, he certainly sounds like more of a threat to the Pax Romana, the peace enforced by the iron fist of Rome, than a failed insurrectionist.

The religious authorities complained about the crowds flocking to Jesus as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Just five days later, the crowds were calling for his death. People are fickle and too often easily swayed. This is especially true if we feel let down or duped. Look at the tabloids in the grocery store, which record the rapid rise and fall of celebrities on a weekly basis.

What is so heartbreaking is that a man who preached a simple message of loving God and loving each other should be considered a threat by the power of the government and the religious institutions. That same message of love was also deemed insufficient in the hearts of the crowds, who would only be satisfied by violent revolt. Honestly, it is remarkable that the Jesus Movement did not get stamped out right there and then.

Thanks to Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene, and the other disciples who held on to and trusted in the message of Jesus, the movement did flourish in some places. Just as Jesus said, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit."¹ And so, it has been.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Let us walk the way of love and the way of sorrows this week with Jesus and his early followers. Let us move in real time with Jesus as he proceeds toward what appears inevitable to us. Let us live the elation, challenges, disappointments, sorrows, and eventually the great triumph with him this week. It is much more than the greatest story ever told, for it is not a story at all. It is the truth that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to the end that all who believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life."²

¹ John 12:24 NRSVUE

² John 3:16 KJV