

Luke 19:28-40 and 22:24-38

There are some Sundays in the Christian year that I find hard to preach. I find it hard to come up with a message that is relevant, but also “fresh.” I think Palm Sunday is probably at the top of that list. How do I go about this in a way that doesn’t feel “old,” or at least not old to me?

Technically, today is known as Palm and Passion Sunday in the Christian liturgical calendar. It bridges the time from the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday up through the crucifixion. The recommended Passion Gospel text for today is basically all of chapters 22 and 23, meaning the Last Supper through Jesus’ burial. And that makes sense if your church is not doing Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services. But we are. So how to approach today? I could preach just on the Palm Gospel, just on the triumphal entry, but frankly, I don’t think there’s enough to say about it.

So what I tried to do was to address the Palm Sunday triumphal entry and then relate it to something in the rest of the Passion story that doesn’t get attention every year. There’s a lot of stuff in the Passion story, more than you can talk about on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

What I see in the texts that we’ve read this morning from the Gospel of Luke is that the Kingdom of God is coming, but not in a way that the world, or even the disciples, the people who knew Jesus best, are expecting.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is obviously a “royal entry.” But it’s a little different than we might expect of a royal entry. Jesus is riding on a donkey, not a horse. It’s an animal of peace, not war.

There are two obvious Old Testament examples that people would think of when they see this. The first is 1 Kings, chapter one. When Solomon is anointed as king, he rides out to receive his coronation on a donkey, his father King David’s donkey. The second is the prophecy of Zechariah 9: “Behold, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, yet humble, riding on a donkey.”

Would people catch the significance of Jesus riding on a donkey, though? Remember, the strong expectations of a Messiah were that he would be a great warrior who would free God’s people from foreign oppression and restore the kingdom to them. Are they going to see that he is a “king” coming in peace?

Jesus is clearly announcing himself as Messiah here. Everything about this moment is designed to attract attention. He is fulfilling a messianic prophecy, in Jerusalem, at Passover time.

The people do not miss this. They cry out with the words of Psalm 118. Psalms 113 through 118 were called the Hallel, and they were used at Passover time, and they had strong messianic tones.

The Pharisees don't miss it either. They're not happy with Jesus doing this. For starters, the Pharisees were generally opposed to messianic figures because they knew they always led to trouble with Rome. The Pharisees were opposed to violent revolution, not because they loved the Romans, but because they knew it would end in disaster. And on top of that, they have rejected Jesus, so they are not going to take well to him announcing himself as the Messiah.

I think Jesus is setting himself up for rejection. He is presenting himself as Messiah, but he is not going to do the things people expect of a Messiah. He's not going to raise an army. He's not going to war with Rome. He is bringing the Kingdom of God, but not as people expected it. No wonder the same crowds who shouted "Hosanna" on Sunday would shout "crucify" on Friday.

Jesus is also not bringing a Kingdom of God as the disciples expect. At the last supper, we find them again arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom.

This is a rejection of the values of the Kingdom of God and a return to the world's values. In this world, kings are tyrants, Jesus reminds them. In the ancient Near East world, kings were divine figures, gods. Their word was law; their will was absolute. And yet they called themselves benefactors, "friends of the people." They dole out favors, but only from a position of power and security. If you're ever seen the movie *Gladiator*, there's a scene in it where, before the games in the coliseum, the emperor's men throw loaves of bread to the crowd. That's the idea of the "benefactor." The Emperor had enormous wealth and power, built on the backs of slaves and the working poor. But he gave them the gladiatorial games and tossed them some bread, so he was a "friend of the people." Those are the world's values, not the values of the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God, greatness is defined by service to others. Leaders are called to be servants to others, not to "lord it over them."

This chapter is full of betrayals. Judas betrays Jesus by handing him over to the authorities. Peter betrays Jesus by denying he even knows him. But the other betrayal is that of the disciples. They betray Jesus by going against the values of the Kingdom and going back to the values and ways of the world.

Jesus tells the disciples, "you will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." That is an "eschatological vision," a vision of what will happen at the end of

time. But how do they hear it, I wonder? My guess is that it plays into their way of thinking.

After this exchange, Jesus predicts Peter's denial. I think the key phrase is, "when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen and build up others." Failure is inevitable. We are all going to fail. We are all going to deny Jesus in one way or another. What matters is what we do after we have failed. We should first return to Jesus. And second, we should serve others.

Before we conclude today, there is one last thing I want to talk about in this text. Jesus tells the disciples, "Sell your cloak and buy a sword." That is a strange thing for Jesus to say. It doesn't jive with what we know of Jesus. Jesus also said in Matthew 26, when Peter uses his sword, "Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." And Jesus immediately puts a stop to the efforts of the disciples to fight off the authorities in the Garden of Gethsemane. He even goes so far as to heal the ear of Malchus, the man Peter attacks with his sword. The disciples say, "Hey, Jesus, we have two swords here." And he says, "That's enough." Why not twelve swords, one for each of them?

There are two possibilities for what is happening in this exchange. One is that Jesus is shutting down the disciples when they take him too literally. He's trying to say that dangerous times are coming, not that they should actually go out and get some swords. "Here are two swords!" "Alright, that's enough of that."

The second possibility is that Jesus wants the disciples to have some swords with them when they go to the Garden of Gethsemane. He is setting himself up again. If they are armed when men come to arrest Jesus, it will further the idea that Jesus is a dangerous revolutionary that Rome should execute.

To be honest, there's a bit of a mystery here. Both seem like reasonable explanations, and I'm not sure which, if either, is correct.

But the nature of the Kingdom of God is not quite such a mystery. It is not a kingdom as the world would expect. It is a kingdom of peace, not conquest. It is a kingdom defined by the work of restoring broken relationships. It is a kingdom where greatness and leadership are defined by service to others, not ruling over others. Jesus sets himself up as king, but not the king people expected. Instead, he is the king we truly need in our lives.