

NOT MUCH POMP AND LOTS OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

At small high school graduations and large university commencement exercises, the scene is the same. When the audience members hear the opening notes of Edward Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1," [Vera will play some of the melody.] they stand as the marshals lead the faculty members and graduates into the auditorium. Teachers and professors wear their different colored robes and hats and the soon to be graduates are anxious to turn their tassels on their mortarboards.

Literary scholars think William Shakespeare coined the phrase "pomp and circumstance" (or at least was the first to put it in writing) in his play *Othello*. In Act 3, Scene 3, the General bemoans the loss of his military career with all of its glory:

*O farewell, farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife;
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
And O, you mortal engines, whose rude throats
Th' immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone.*

Fifteen years ago, biblical scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg published an interesting book called *The Last Week*. They discuss the events of the last week of Jesus's life – what we call "Holy Week." Although they depend mostly on the Gospel of Mark, their description of Palm Sunday fits all four gospels, since Jesus's entry into Jerusalem is found in Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19, and John 12. They contrast Jesus's arrival on a donkey with Pontius Pilate's arrival with all of the trappings – the "pomp and circumstance" – expected of a Roman ruler. Here's how they describe the two entrances on a Sunday, 2,000 years ago.

"One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down from the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers [were] from the peasant class.

"On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire.

“Imagine the imperial procession’s arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagle mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums, the swirling of dust.”¹

Talk about pomp and circumstance! The Romans knew how to do pomp and circumstance and they used their displays of power to send a powerful message: Caesar is Lord! In fact, “pomp” comes from the Latin word *pompa* for procession and “circumstance” comes from the Latin word *circumstare*, to stand around, referring to the trappings of the event itself. When Shakespeare talked about “pomp and circumstance,” he meant “the ceremony of fuss made about an important event.” You can understand how it doesn’t take much to go from “pomp” to “pompous”!

The pomp was certainly missing when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Here’s how the prophet Zechariah described the appearance of the long-awaited Messiah on the Mount of Olives:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*²

Someone said the modern-day equivalent of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey is a victorious military leader riding in on a tractor instead of in a tank. In his thoughts about Luke’s picture of Jesus entering Jerusalem, Thomas Long writes, “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he did so as a king, but his royalty was not pomp and power but humble obedience. In obedience he set his face to Jerusalem, knowing that violence awaited him at journey’s end. In obedience he traveled along the way, eating and drinking with sinners, and remaining faithful to God’s desire to gather the rejected and the lost. Then he entered the city to make peace with the offering of his own life.”³

Yes, the pomp of Pilate’s imperial power procession is missing from Jesus’s donkey ride into the city. Did you notice what else is missing in this Palm Sunday story? Strangely enough, there are no palm branches in today’s gospel lesson. For that matter, there are no branches of any kind mentioned. If we named today’s celebration after Luke’s telling of the story, we would be here on Garment Sunday or Coat Sunday. Doesn’t have the same ring and appeal, does it?

But, isn’t it wonderful to have the children processing down the aisle and waving palm branches on Palm Sunday as we all sing, “Hosanna, loud hosanna the little children sang; through pillared court and temple the lovely anthem rang”? Of course, it is! Our opening hymn ends by reminding us what it means for us to sing our hosannas today: “Hosanna in the highest!” That ancient song we sing, for Christ is our Redeemer, the Lord of heaven, our King. O may we ever praise him with heart and life and voice and in his blissful presence eternally rejoice.”

Well, if we take away the pomp of the palm branches and the “Hosannas,” what do we have left on this Palm Sunday morning? What we have are the circumstances swirling around the beginning of that Holy Week 2,000 years ago. As he rode the donkey down the Mount of Olives and up Mount Zion, Jesus was one of countless pilgrims in town to celebrate the Festival of the Passover. Under the watchful eye of the imperial Roman governor and his legions of troops, faithful Jews gathered to remember how their God had set them free from another oppressive, imperial power when he led them out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land of freedom.

That’s certainly one circumstance of that Palm Sunday. Another circumstance was the blindness of the people – or, at least, their leaders – to what was happening right in front of them. Originally, I had planned to end the gospel reading at v. 40, He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” But Jesus was still riding on the donkey as he drew near Jerusalem, and his reaction is the perfect expression of the bittersweet nature of this day we call Palm Sunday, when we welcome the King who comes to us humble and riding on a donkey.

Jesus looked out over the city of God and he wept over it. You can hear the anguish in his words, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” (Luke 19:41-42) I think Jesus might have been talking to the Pharisees who had asked him to tell his disciples to shut up. It sounds as if the Pharisees wanted to keep the peace with Rome – as they say, “to go along to get along” – so they rejected the peace Jesus brought in the name of the Lord.

One preacher puts it this way: “The Pharisees tell Jesus to tell the people to be quiet. The Pharisees reject the praises because it puts the ‘peace’ of Jerusalem at risk. Of course, the peace the Pharisees are worried about losing is a false peace, a peace rooted in fear. It is not the kind of peace that Jesus has produced with his powerful acts, but is a peace that tries to keep things the same for the sake of ‘unity’ and ‘stability.’” She continues, “Fear keeps us from being able to wonder, it can make us rigid in what is acceptable and appropriate and will ultimately keep us from being able to see the goodness of the Lord and to worship; inevitably this posture develops into the ability to join in the way of God.”⁴In other words, the things that make for peace – God’s peace – in our own day will be hidden from our very eyes when we give in to the fear.

I love the pomp and circumstance of Palm Sunday – always have, always will – the waving palms, the children singing, the cries of “Hosanna!”, the excitement of the beginning of Holy Week, and the promise of our Easter Sunday celebration in just one week. However, if we substitute and prefer the pomp and circumstance of our own making to the message Jesus brings in his ride on the donkey and in his tears over Jerusalem, then we will, indeed, be blinded to the things that make for the kind of peace we so desperately long for, the kind of peace this world so desperately needs, the kind of peace the man riding on the donkey offers.

Throughout Lent we have heard about Jesus walking along the Emmaus Road with Cleopas and his companion. We have sung songs and thought about the Lenten journey to the cross. And we have asked Jesus to walk the road with us, even as we hope and pray we are able to walk the road with him. Thomas Long reminds us, “To

live the Christian life is to assume the pattern of Jesus' obedience, to allow 'Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! Good will to all people!' to become a drumbeat marking our own steps along the pilgrim way. For Jesus, obedience meant carrying the cross; for most of us, it means lifting a thousand little and daily crosses in the complexities and demands of our many relationships."⁵

In 1821, Henry Hart Hilman sent the lyrics to several hymns he had written to Reginal Heber, who is perhaps best remembered for his hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!" Heber had asked friends and colleagues to contribute original hymns for a hymnbook he hoped to publish. Heber wanted hymns to use throughout the church year, especially in particular liturgical seasons. Of the hymns Hilman sent, there were two that could be used on what was called the "Sixth Sunday of Lent," or "Sunday next before Easter." We know it as Palm Sunday. About one of Hilman's hymns, one history says, "Unlike some hymns that celebrate this occasion with unalloyed rejoicing, this text never loses sight of the bittersweet, even ironic, dimensions of Jesus' reception in Jerusalem at the beginning of that eventful week."⁶

That particular hymns, Henry Hart Hilman's hymn for "Sunday next before Easter," is our closing hymn today, "Ride On! Ride On in Majesty!" As you hear the words now and as you sing the hymn in a few minutes, notice how Hilman weaves together the bittersweet joy and sorrow of Palm Sunday. Listen for how Hilman describes the pomp and circumstance of Jesus' donkey ride into Jerusalem on that Sunday 2,000 years ago.

*Ride on! ride on in majesty!
Hark! all the tribes hosanna cry;
thy humble beast pursues its road
with palms and scattered garments strowed.*

*Ride on! ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
O Christ, thy triumphs now begin
o'er captive death and conquered sin.*

*Ride on! ride on in majesty!
The hosts of angels in the sky
look down with sad and wondering eyes
to see the approaching sacrifice.*

*Ride on! ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
bow thy meek head to mortal pain;
then take, O God, thy power, and reign.*

Let us pray: Ah, holy Jesus, to you who triumphed over death, we sing our praise. Your steadfast love endures forever. As we face your death and recall the week of your suffering, may we do so with a joy that

anticipates the celebration of your resurrection. May we do so with the confidence to turn to you in both life and death. Amen.

NOTES

¹Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), pp. 2-3.

²Zechariah 9:9-10

³Thomas G. Long, "Season's Greetings," for April 8 (Luke 19:28-40), March 21, 2001 at www.christiancentury.org.

⁴Chelsey Harmon, "Sermon Commentary for Sunday, April 10, 2022, Luke 19:28-40," at www.cepreaching.org.

⁵Long, *ibid.*

⁶Carl P. Daw, Jr., *Glory to God: A Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), pp. 200-201.