



Christian hope means to know about evil and yet to go to meet the future with confidence... faith rests upon accepting being loved by God, and therefore to believe is to say Yes, not only to him, but to creation, to creatures, above all, to men, to try to see the image of God in each person and thereby to become a lover.

Palm Sunday

The Shofar

Mark's Passion

Holy Week can be Confusing!

Today is **Palm Sunday**, the day on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a young donkey. For generations we Christians have celebrated the feast as the *triumphal* entry into Jerusalem. But, if this was a *triumphal entry*, why did they then crucify Jesus on **Good Friday**?

What goes wrong by Friday that Jesus will find himself betrayed by one of his own disciples, arrested by the high priest's guard, accused by a coalition of religious leaders, tried by the Roman governor, and sentenced to die the death of a common criminal—death by crucifixion?

A Day of Two Processions

Jesus' procession into Jerusalem was not the only procession the city saw that day. In the year 30 AD, Roman historians record that the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, led a procession of Roman cavalry and centurions into the city of Jerusalem.

Imagine the spectacle of that entry. From the western side of the city, the opposite side from which Jesus enters, Pontius Pilate leads Roman soldiers on horseback and on foot. Each soldier was clad in leather armour polished to a high gloss. On each centurion's head, hammered helmets gleamed in the bright sunlight. At their sides, sheathed in their scabbards, were swords crafted from the hardest steel; and, in their hands, each centurion carried a spear; or if he was an archer, a bow with a sling of arrows across his back.

Drummers and pipers set the cadence of march for this was no ordinary entry into Jerusalem. Pilate, as governor of the region knew it was standard practice for the Roman governor of a foreign territory to be in its capital for religious celebrations. It was the beginning of Passover, a strange Jewish festival that the Romans allowed. However, the Romans must have been aware that this festival celebrated the

liberation of the Jews from another empire, the empire of Egypt.

The Jews wanted a military messiah

Pilate had to be in Jerusalem. Since the Romans had occupied this land by defeating the Jews and deposing their king about 80 years before, uprisings were always in the air. The last major uprising, long before Pilate's time, had been after the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC.

The uprising started in Sepphoris, about 5 miles from Jesus' boyhood home of Nazareth. Before it was over the city of Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee, and the town of Emmaus had been destroyed by the Roman army.

After putting down the rebellion there, the Romans marched on Jerusalem. After pacifying the city, they crucified over 2,000 Jews who were accused of being part of the rebellion. The Romans had made their intolerance for rebellion well-known. And so on this occasion, Pilate had travelled with a contingent of Rome's finest from his preferred headquarters in Caesarea-by-the-Sea, to the stuffy, crowded, provincial capital of the Jews, Jerusalem.

The Temple would be the centre of any Passover activity. Antonia's Fortress, the Roman garrison built adjacent to the Temple compound, would serve as a good vantage point from which to keep an eye on the Jews. Pilate's entry into Jerusalem was meant to send a message to the Jews, and to those who might be plotting against the empire of Rome. The spectacle was meant to remind the Jews of what had happened the last time there was a wide-scale uprising. It was meant to intimidate the citizens of Jerusalem

themselves, who might think twice about joining such a rebellion if it was slated to fail.

The “other” king

If Pilate’s procession was meant as a show of military might and strength, Jesus’ procession was meant to show the opposite. Both Matthew and Mark record Jesus’s own words, as he instructs his disciples to go in to the city and find a donkey tied up. They are to ask the owner if they may use the donkey, and they are to say that “the Lord needs them.”

Then, Jesus quotes from **Zechariah**, the 9th chapter – *Say to the Daughter of Zion, “See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

But read the full chapter!

There is more to this passage than just a description of Jesus’ means of transportation for that day. The prophet Zechariah is speaking to the nation. In **Zechariah 9**, the prophet reassures the people of Judah, that God has not forgotten them. In quoting this prophet Jesus reminded those who heard him of the entire passage. The message *they heard* was, *God will deliver the nation from the oppressor*—in this case, Rome!

The king they seek will come to them humbly, not on a war horse, but on a slow-moving donkey, the symbol of a king who comes in peace, according to Zechariah. The two processions could not be any more different in the messages they convey. Pilate, leading Roman centurions, asserts the power and might of the empire of Rome which crushes all who oppose it.

Jesus, riding on a young donkey, embodies the peace and tranquillity that the shalom, the peace God brings to His people. Those who watch that day will make a choice. They will either serve the god of this world, might and power; or they will choose to serve the king of a very different kind of kingdom, the **Kingdom of God**.

So, Jesus has another problem. Of course, his followers and others who get caught up in his entry into Jerusalem think they are choosing to

follow Jesus. But by the end of the week, Jesus will have disappointed the crowd at a rate faster than they can stand. They will turn on him. Even those closest to Jesus will either betray him outright, or abandon him in confusion and fear.

It is interesting to note that the crowd on that Sunday, proclaimed, “*Hosanna to the Son of David!*” In other words, they were placing their faith in Jesus that he would restore the glory of the nation to its splendour when David and his son, Solomon, ruled a united kingdom.

Jesus had challenged the rulers of Judea already. Not the Roman rulers, but the local rulers. He had said to them that the Temple was not the only way to find God’s forgiveness; and further, that the Temple would be destroyed, with not one stone left on another.

Interesting: Pilate served a “son of god” too. The late emperor Augustus, who ruled from 31 BC to 14 AD, was said to have been fathered by the god, Apollo, and conceived by his divine mother, Atia. Inscriptions referred to him as “son of god,” “lord,” and even, “saviour.” After his death, the legend had it that he was seen ascending into heaven, to take his place among the gods.

A contrast between kings and kingdoms was on display that day in Rome. And, although many of the common people thought they sided with Jesus, they did so for the same reasons the Pharisees and others sided with Rome

Jesus was a very different king indeed!

They thought Jesus could do for them what Rome had done for their rulers—make their lives better, deliver them from the oppressive system under which they lived and worked, and turn the tables on the Romans. That is why the crowd turns on Jesus by the end of the week. They do not think he’s going to do any of those things. And, in addition, Jesus is going to make life worse for them, not better. Their religious leaders, all of them, who never agree on anything, agree that Jesus is going to attract the attention of the Roman empire, especially during Passover, and Rome will come down fast and hard on the entire nation. (**John 11:45-50**)

So, when Jesus is accused, when he is brought by Pilate before the angry mobs, they want to be rid of him. Jesus, in their minds, never did what they wanted him to do. He never defeated the Romans, he never dissolved the unfair tax system, he never put common people in charge of the government, and furthermore, he never would. For a Messiah he was a disappointment.

To appease the crowds that swelled the city of Jerusalem, Pilate had the custom of releasing prisoners, many of whom were political prisoners. All the time, it was not peace Pilate wanted, but an absence of violence. On this last week in the life of Jesus, Pilate offers the crowd a choice between Barabbas, a known robber, and Jesus, a failed Messiah. Fearing that if Jesus were released, he would start all over again, the crowd, egged on by the Jewish leaders begged for Barabbas to be released, and for Jesus to be executed. And not just by any means, “Crucify him” was the cry. Because crucifixion was the one form of capital punishment that would show Rome the Jews were completely loyal, and would humiliate Jesus, even in death.

Palm Sunday a day of confusion

The actors assembled for the Passover feast are a “who’s who” of Roman dignitaries. The whole scene was one of contrast between the power, might, majesty and cruelty of one empire and the kingdom inaugurated by a humble Jewish preacher, teacher and prophet. In this clash of kingdoms, the most advanced civilization of the ancient world failed at every level. Indeed, from the governing officials to the most human of personal relationships, everything in this story turned south, turned sour, and betrayed its moment in history. It was the dead, crucified Jewish criminal who ends up being victorious in his death.

The Roman government was corrupt, and the Temple’s hierarchy was complicit. The crowd ended up a fickle, hostile mob. Jesus’s close friends deserted him, and two betrayed or denied him. From just about every level the powerful were victorious, the weak crushed. But that was by human reckoning alone.

Sunday is a story of disappointment, denial, betrayal, aggression, corruption, apathy, indifference, grief, doubt, and sorrow. Yet even then, God overcame every evil force and carried out the plan conceived from the world’s foundation (**Ephesians 1:4**... *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight*...

Prophetic Fulfillment

Palm Sunday puts an emphasis on the way divine prophecy is fulfilled in even what may appear to be chaotic events. From the moment Jesus cursed the fig tree to his cry from the cross, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (**Psalm 22:1**), the events of Holy Week were unsurprising to God. They were part of his plan even though the participants struggled to make sense of what was happening.

People seek personal assurance that God is not surprised by the chaotic and fretful events of their lives and our world. We can be comforted knowing that God has a plan. Even if it is unknown to us, the Lord can turn our chaos into something he will use. In **Romans 8:28**, Paul says, *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.* That is the Good News that enables us to move from Palm Sunday, through the apparent disasters of Good Friday and on to fullness of joy and the restoration of hope on Easter Sunday morning.

Two kings. Two kingdoms. Two radically different visions for the world.

Pilate’s vision was a world dominated by power, violence, subjugation, and domination. Jesus offered a vision of human flourishing cantered on service, humility, peace, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation and reciprocity. Jesus was staging something akin to a counter-demonstration – in appearance though not planned that way. While Pilate rode into the city on a military stallion, Jesus entered on a borrowed donkey, symbolized sovereignty—but also Zechariah’s promise that Yahweh would banish the war horse forever!”

The truth is that this clash between these two kingdoms has only just begun. The remainder of Holy Week pits the Kingdom of God against the

kingdoms of this world, ultimately culminating in Jesus' death at the hands of the religious leaders and the Roman Empire.

Still to this day, the kingdoms of this world trust the power of the sword while the Kingdom of God rests in the power of the cross. Holy Week comes to us as an invitation to choose an enduring Peace that is built on the crucified Messiah rather than pursue a peace that is little more than a chimera. God's Shalom is guaranteed only to those who choose the cross over the sword.

Will we choose to continue living according to the dominating ways of this world or will we risk joining Jesus in the liberating work of justice, peace-making, and political enfranchisement?

Holy Week is a celebration of Hope

Hope in its simplest form is looking forward to something positive in our future. Without hope, life withers and dies. Men and women reach out for and grab onto hope wherever they can find it. Sadly, for those who are not followers of Jesus, the only enduring hope is that which comes to us from the crucified Messiah, the one who conquered the grave and as first born from the dead, invites us into a kingdom where darkness has been defeated and light seeps into the darkest parts of all human existence.

The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky said, "To live without hope is to cease to live." Hope is as vital to our daily survival as water but only divine Hope endures.

Today's world is in desperate need of hope. With instability and troubling events abounding, people are grasping for hope in various ways: political parties, the military, careers, families, and even relocating to new places. New and bankrupt social justice philosophies spring up but they achieve little more than further division and disappointment. All these hopes will eventually end with death.

We long for a hope that transcends the grave, yet this is the kind of hope the world cannot possibly provide. The world offers only an empty hope.

To try and gain a feeling for what things must have been like on that first Easter morning, imagine Mary Magdelene thoughts and feelings as she realizes the gardener is not actually the gardener.

Her pain and sorrow must have been enormous. Her teacher and friend had died just days earlier, a terrible death she had seen with her own eyes. She had thought she had lost him for good. And now someone has stolen his body, or so she thought. This was adding insult to injury. Hope was gone.

Hope does not require understanding

Good Friday was bad enough. Mary watched Jesus tortured and executed in public. And for what purpose? For being a rabbi that preached a radical way of being in fellowship with all of creation? For feeding the hungry? Clothing the poor? Speaking out for the oppressed? Perhaps for challenging the status quo and preaching justice and liberation from oppression?

Sometimes it can be too easy to feel forsaken and lost in this world. Things can go wrong without notice, people who were once friends become estranged and line up against us. When selfish people manipulate others to control worldly power; when it looks like dishonour and corruption reign unchallenged and the strong and powerful accumulate so much and all the while the powerless and righteous suffer and left without hope.

Holy Week is story of enduring hope

While we began with our reflections on Palm Sunday, it is important to see our Easter story from the perspective of Easter Sunday morning. Today we are a resurrection people who live in the reality of a Jesus who is the Risen and Glorious Christ of God. Christ has died and has Risen. Alleluia!

But to reach the Resurrection we first need to follow Christ along the road to Golgotha. Only by sitting beneath the cross can we experience the enduring truth of what fullness of life means. It is only Hope that can transform life in the face of death to a vision of life eternal in the face in Christ. **This is the good news...** that death cannot conquer love. Death cannot conquer God. God's love for us, for everyone, transcends death. That is Easter!