

Philippians 2:5-11 What Was He Thinking? – the Mind of Christ 16 March 2008
Matthew 21:1-11 First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL Palm Sunday
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This morning was my second parade in the last few days. Friday I watched the St. Patrick's Day parade, which left 5 Points and ended up at Linn Park. And of course we just finished our annual Palm Sunday processional with our neighbors at St. Paul Catholic Church.

The St. Patrick's Day parade was interesting because OmegaCon is this weekend – the big Science Fiction convention. This being Birmingham, there were different interpretations of what a Vulcan is! There were pointy-eared Vulcan costumes like the race of humanoids from Star Trek. And there were costumes of our own Vulcan, god of the forge (with a sign: "Make sure the kids get enough iron.")

Different interpretations. That very first Palm Sunday processional involved some different interpretations – of what a Messiah was, of what was going on in that parade. As we look at this text, a couple of things are worth remembering. First, we are reading Gospel, not literal history. Surely this event happened, but perhaps not exactly as described. Matthew did not intend to be a historian, but to be an evangelist – to persuade us of the Good News about Jesus Christ. Second, there are no extra words, nothing wasted, and they are all intended to convey meaning.

We might wonder, "What was Jesus thinking?", to ride into Jerusalem in a re-enactment of an Old Testament prophecy, Zechariah 9, of the promised Messianic King of Israel? As if he were deliberately tempting Roman authorities? But to Roman eyes it may have been only slightly unusual. They were not the audience for this parade. This prophecy is where the two-animal thing comes from. Matthew went to great lengths to show the disciples fetching for Jesus both a donkey and her colt, for him to ride. The original Zechariah text : *Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you... humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* is typical Hebrew parallelism, the way Hebrews wrote poetry. They paired concepts instead of rhyming words. Of course Matthew knew this; so his description may be deliberately over-the-top, underscoring that indeed this is the promised Messiah.

We might wonder, "how did Jesus come from relative obscurity to so anger Rome, as well as the Jewish collaborators with Rome, in such a few days?" Again, it is possible, even likely that Matthew reset the story in another time, Passover, to bring the Triumphal Entry into close proximity with the Crucifixion. Probably it was really in the Fall. The procession fits the description of the Procession of Sukkoth at the Feast of Tabernacles (what we might call Autumn Harvest Celebration, or "Thanksgiving" in this country.) The waving branches may have been the *lulab*, leafy arrangements of willow and myrtle dominated by a palm frond. A half a year seems a more likely time to run afoul of powers and principalities.

If so, the Gospel writers may have given it to us this way to contrast Jesus' way with the ways of the world. Biblical scholars Borg and Crossan say that there were 2 processions – one from the west, Pontius Pilate with war horses and a Roman Legion, to offer a show of force during Passover, to cries of “Hail Caesar!” And from the east, the direction from which the ancient Hebrews entered the Promised Land, Jesus on a beast of commerce, coming up the Jordan Valley with ordinary and even marginalized people, to cries of “Hosanna! (Save us now!)”¹

A fair contrast. Which parade is ours? And do we know what it means for us, these joyful cries of “Hosanna” and “Blessed is He” that we make? Lest, as the poet T.S. Eliot said, in the midst of the experience we miss the meaning.

The moments of happiness – not the sense of wellbeing,
Fruition, fulfillment, security or affection,
Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination –
We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness.²

There were parades that day, one about prestige and power, the other with common folks and about humility. How much have we “had the experience and missed the meaning,” with our palm branches in one hand and our agendas or shopping lists in the other. Different interpretations of the parade, and its meaning. So, in 2008, what greeting awaits the Prince of Peace?

Some have the notion that we're welcoming Santa Claus - a conclusion one could draw from a recent event at the BJCC with a wildly successful (?) pastor and author who tells us that God just means to bless you with what you want, and if you don't get it, that is because you didn't ask. God as the vending machine in heaven, I guess. Some would have a Jesus who rewards the righteous with wealth and punishes the poor, saying that they got what they deserve for making bad choices.

Some modern churches won't show a cross in their building because it doesn't mean anything to unchurched folks and just conveys the wrong message, they say. (Talk about missing the meaning! Paul wrote that he “*decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*” 1 Cor. 2:2)

Some would have a Jesus whose intent is not to redeem the whole creation, but to destroy it and rescue only a handful. Some would have a Jesus who leads us into a holy war in religion's name. Some would have a Jesus who wants you to vote for their candidate. Some would have a Jesus who looks and sounds just like us. And there we all stand at the eastern gate, palm branch in one hand and purchase order in the other.

But we'd be at the wrong gate. That's the imperial power, not the Christly one.

What was he thinking? What did he intend? While it may sound presumptuous to talk about the mind of Christ (what would Jesus do?), searching out the mind of Christ is a worthy spiritual discipline. Paul wrote in Philippians “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*” and he used the words to an early Christian hymn to say what that was – he didn’t exploit his equality with God, emptied himself, humbled himself, and was obedient even to death on a cross.

Another way to search out what he was thinking is to see what he did, after his entry into Jerusalem. First, went to the temple to worship, then drove the thieves and money-changers from the temple, healed the sick and blind and lame, confronted the religious leaders, claimed his authority as the Son of God, wept over Jerusalem, and told a lot of wonderful stories.

What was in his mind, what did he want us to understand? One of the reasons I hope you come to as many of the Holy Week services as you can is that it is one way to take intentional time to search the mind of Christ. If we reenact his last week of earthly life, what do we learn about our own?

Tim McGraw sings a song about living in the face of death, and part of it goes: “*I went sky diving, I went Rocky Mountain climbing, I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fu Manchu. And I loved deeper and I spoke sweeter, and I gave forgiveness I’d been denyin’. Some day I hope you get the chance to live like you were dyin’*”³

To search out the mind of Christ, may exactly mean that we have to “live like we were dyin’”, and be free of the fear that drives most human behavior – fear of the other, fear of the unknown, fear of death. It is the way of the Cross. Martin Luther King Jr., said it this way: “*Cowardice asks the question, 'Is it safe?' Expediency asks the question, 'Is it politic?' Vanity asks the question, 'Is it popular?' But, conscience asks the question, 'Is it right?' And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because one's conscience tells one that it is right.*”⁴

Which parade is for us? Here is Good News – despite our various agendas, Jesus comes to us still, with his own mind. He is the anti-empire, not to replace our human empires, but to render every one of them obsolete now and for always. If the empire’s power is force and the threat of death, then the action of Jesus Christ to destroy the power of death on the Cross puts an end to the whole question. Grace, salvation, love, are offered to all humankind. So when we make it through this passion week, we may rightly sing: “The Kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.”

¹ Borg, Marcus and Crossan, John Dominic *The Last Week : A Day by Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem,* HarperCollins, N.Y. 2006

² Eliot, T.S. “Dry Salvages”, in *Four Quartets*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1943

³ McGraw, Tim, *Live Like You Were Dyin’*, album of same name, Curb Records, 2004

⁴ King Jr., Martin Luther from a sermon entitled *Standing by the Best in an Evil Time.*