

The Palm Sunday Parade

Luke 19:28-44

Rev. Philip Parker

March 24, 2024

Everyone loves a parade. At least I hope so. One of my parade memories goes all the way back to my childhood. On Memorial Day we would drive in to Portsmouth to view one of the oldest celebrations of this holiday. It began in 1884 and has been continuous ever since. Honoring the service and sacrifice of the men and women of our Armed Forces, thousands of people would gather in downtown Portsmouth. As a child I remember seeing the marching bands, the various floats and lots of dignitaries riding in fancy limousines. What I remember most of all, however, was the columns of soldiers and sailors marching in step down the middle of High Street, followed by military vehicles. On one occasion there was even a tank on a flat-bed truck. For a youngster it was quite a scene, one that I still vividly remember to this day.

For those who were a part of the Palm Sunday parade, it too was a memorable occasion. Starting on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, it wound its way down from that hillside into the Kidron Valley and then up into the city of Jerusalem. It concluded at the Temple, the holiest locale in all of Judea. It was a processional pathway that had been used for centuries by those who were on their way to be crowned as kings. Furthermore, its final destination at the Temple gave such processions not only an opportunity to ignite patriotic fervor, but to also create an expectation of divine favor. Now that Jerusalem and all of Judea was governed by the Romans, any such demonstrations were a source of great concern, especially during the days leading up to the celebration of the Passover. Like their ancestors enslaved in Egypt, many Jews longed for the day when their nation would be free from foreign occupation. For that reason Pontius Pilate, the Roman Procurator, was always concerned that these kinds of events could turn into a riot or worse. They could escalate into a full scale revolt. Extra guards were stationed along the route just in case things got out of hand.

So this morning, I invite you to become a part of this processional parade. I want you to become one of those who were in the throng of people who greeted Jesus as He entered the city of Jerusalem. I want you to observe what happened on that day and to imagine whom you would have most likely been identified with as you waited for Jesus' arrival. In fact, even now

as the crowds are beginning to gather, look around and see who is standing nearby.

First of all, there are a lot of Roman soldiers. They are dressed in full battle gear with swords and shields, carrying long spears to maintain crowd control. They have been told by their commanding officer, "All right men, you know what we're facing. Thousands of pilgrims are coming into the city to celebrate the Passover. It's a Jewish holiday, celebrating their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. It took place a long time ago, but they have not forgotten how their God delivered them from their oppressors. Neither have they forgotten that they consider us to be their oppressors. So be on your guard. Anything can happen, especially this year. The Galilean called Jesus is coming into the city along with His followers. Some are saying that He is their messiah, anointed by their God to lead the nation. There could be trouble so be prepared."

One of the biggest groups in the Palm Sunday parade are the disciples of Jesus. Their number includes the twelve apostles. The crowd also includes a wide assortment of individuals who had been a part of His movement from the beginning as well as those who had recently joined, attracted by the miracles they had witnessed. Seeing Jesus riding on a donkey and remembering that the inauguration of their ancient kings had followed a similar practice, they are truly excited. Some, in fact, remember what the prophet Zechariah once said, "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). Wow, they are thinking. This is it. God has sent the Savior of our people. Waving palm branches, a symbolic gesture of enthusiastic zeal, they begin shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest" (Luke 19:38).

Another group in the crowd are the religious leaders of Judea. They are composed of two groups. The first are the Sadducees. They are the priests who run the Temple. Collecting offerings for the various sacrifices that are offered on the high altar is a profitable business that has insured a luxurious life style for themselves and their families. They operate the Temple under the guidance and protection of the Roman authorities. They do not want anything to happen which might endanger that relationship. They see this demonstration as a clear threat to their way of life. The other group are the Pharisees. They are teachers who instruct the people about the laws of God. Here in Jerusalem as well as in the towns and villages throughout Judea and Galilee they are in charge of the synagogues, places of worship and religious

instruction, much like our local churches. They too are worried. They are equally opposed to anything which causes unrest. They know what the Romans can do when revolution breaks out. They preach the importance of keeping the Law of Moses and living a quiet and respectful way of life. They believe that if the Jewish people could keep the Law, even for just a few days, the Lord would send His anointed Messiah, probably a respected Rabbi, like themselves. They don't like this Jesus from Nazareth. He's criticized them and called them out for their hypocrisy. Furthermore, He doesn't have the right credentials and His followers are nothing more than a band of vagabonds. As far as they are concerned, this demonstration is not only illegal, but also a real threat to what they have been trying to achieve. Rarely do the Pharisees and the Sadducees get along with one another. But on this occasion, they are united in their vocal opposition to Jesus and the crowds following after Him. In fact, some of them are shouting at Jesus as He passes by. They demand, "Tell your disciples to stop all this racket. They will incite a riot." Jesus in response tells them, "If they remain silent, the very stones of this city will cry out."

Finally, in the middle of all this enthusiastic chaos, there is Jesus. One would have thought that He would be smiling, rejoicing with those who were celebrating His arrival. But instead He was weeping. Why? Because He can see into the future. He knows that in a few short days these hosannas of praise will become shouts of anger and rejection. Not the people in this Palm Sunday parade, but others will accuse Him of being an imposter, someone pretending to be God's Son. They will turn Him over to the Romans for crucifixion. Not only that, looking even further into the future, He realizes that His own people, the Jewish nation will turn away from Him even after His resurrection. They will turn away from God's salvation and the opportunity to be the agents of a spiritual revival that could embrace all of humanity. Instead, they will cling to their nationalist aspirations, revolt against Rome and experience the complete devastation of everything that they hold near and dear. Jerusalem will be destroyed and the Jewish people will be dispersed like wind-blown chaff. Looking into the future as He gazes upon the city, He says, "They will dash you to the ground, you and children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you" (Luke 19:44).

So I ask you again, where would you have stood, what would you have done, how would you have been a part of this Palm Sunday parade? I suspect, knowing you as I do, that you would have been in the procession making its way into Jerusalem. You are Jesus's disciples and you have honored Him and served Him for many years. However, what if the time

frame from two thousand years ago was moved to today, what would it be like if Jesus made His way into our lives in the twenty-first century? Yes, there would be thousands upon millions welcoming His arrival right here in America. But not everyone. There would be some, like the Roman soldiers, who would do their best to make sure that this event did not have front page coverage. They would block it from our various social media platforms and do their best to down play its importance. After all, we now live in a secular society when such ancient superstitions can get out of hand. They must be repressed.

There would be another group whose objections would be even more pointed. They would declare and indeed they have declared that such religious exuberance is dangerous. They would classify those who are deeply devoted to Christ as domestic terrorists. They would express the need to control this population within our nation and to take steps to arrest and even incarcerate them if necessary. Like many other totalitarian states they would begin to take steps to restrict religious freedom, especially if it differed from their stated goals of creating a godless society.

All of which brings me to this somber realization. If Jesus once again entered into our world, especially our small portion of it here in America, I am certain that He would once again be weeping. He would see how so many had turned away from Him. He would see the consequences of that decision and how it is destroying the very fabric of our lives as a people. He would see the hurt and pain that we are heaping upon ourselves by lifestyles filled with self-indulgence and our disregard for time honored moral standards. He would see the eventual decline and fall of a once great people and it would break His heart. The nation that was once described as "city on a hill," a beacon of hope shining brightly for all the world to see, would now be reduced to a darkened relic of the past. Unless we are a people truly repentant and willing to find our way back to God, unless we are willing to join with crowds welcoming Jesus into their lives, the words which Jesus spoke over Jerusalem will become the words which He speaks once again over us, "Not one stone will be left upon another because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."