

## **Jesus on the Move**

**A Palm Sunday Sermon by James R. Newby**

**Text: Matthew 21:1-11**

**Our Christian tradition teaches us that today is the day that we celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. For the author of Matthew's Gospel, this act is the tipping point for the Roman authorities and their collaborating Jewish leaders, which will eventually lead to Jesus' demise less than a week later. We are all familiar with the story, where Jesus sends two disciples to get him a donkey to ride into the city. All of the pictures in our minds show Jesus sitting atop this little animal, with people, filled with hope that their Messiah had come, laying palm branches and garments in front of him, shouting *Hosanna*, and waving at him from the windows of their homes. We know the story.**

**For the Gospel writers, this story is important because it is used by them to support the prophecy that we find in Zechariah 9:9, which reads: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and**

victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass."

Over the years, Biblical scholars have been skeptical of this story. Many claim that the story was conceived by the writers to fit the prophecy of Zechariah. They believe that the words ascribed to Jesus are the invention of the storytellers, either Mark, from whom Matthew borrows this account, or of someone prior to Mark who developed the narrative. Whatever the historical accuracy of the story, we can be grateful for it, because it is a *story of hope*.

On the other side of Jerusalem on that same day, another parade was taking place. Entering the city gate, being carried on his throne above the heads of his soldiers, Pontius Pilate arrived in the ancient city to show his power and to keep order during the season of Passover. This military procession had come from "Caesarea on the Sea," about sixty miles to the west of Jerusalem. Like the Roman governors of Judea and Samaria before and after him, Pilate lived in this new city on the coast. For them, it was much more pleasant

than Jerusalem, the traditional capital of the Jewish people, which was inland, provincial and partisan, and often hostile. But for the major Jewish festivals, Pilate, like his predecessors and successors, went to Jerusalem.

Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city—A visual extravaganza of imperial power—Cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, armor, helmets, weapons, banners and golden eagles mounted on poles. And then there was that other parade that day—the parade of the Galilean. Jesus' procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire of Rome. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, *the empire of God*.

Here you have two competing images of what power looks like...Pontius Pilate representing human power, and Jesus representing God's understanding of power. In this act of humility, Jesus is showing us how God wants to be understood—not in the nature of an aloof, arrogant ruler, but One who seeks to be close to

**His people. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was in complete contradiction to the customary use of power, where rulers command and use force to intimidate. He came, instead, to share with whomever would listen, his message of love and forgiveness.**

**Over the years, that crowd that met Jesus as he entered Jerusalem, has not been treated very well by the Christian community. It is usually depicted as a fickle mob, misguided in its messianic expectations, and theologically shallow. Maybe this is why we can relate to them! I had a colleague at the Earlham School of Religion who would say, "Way down deep I am really quite shallow!"**

**Anyway, this first Palm Sunday crowd does seem to be all of the things we have ascribed to them. But Friends, they were at least one thing more: *They were sufficiently free of their inhibitions to act on the impulse to rejoice in God among them.***

**If you are like me, I don't mind a "hallelujah" now and then, just as long as it is within the well-defined structure of a hymn and**

**others are singing with me. Acting on impulse and expressing any outward emotion at anything does not come easy for me, or for most Quakers I know. Of course I know those “hallelujah emotions” but far be it from me to express them openly! “Clapping,” saying “Amen,” or expressing a “hal” or “leluia” is not something that many of us do with any sense of comfort.**

**Those first Palm Sunday pilgrims, however, did not have these same reservations. They felt the presence of God in their midst, and they openly rejoiced.**

**As represented by that triumphal entry into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, we worship a God on the move, a God of process and journey. Here is Jesus setting his face to go to Jerusalem, going the way appointed for him. Here he is entering the city and confronting the civil and religious authorities...Here he is walking toward the cross and physical death...Three days later we have stories of his resurrection. The women at the tomb are met with the news, “He is not here, he has *gone before you*. The disciples on the**

road to Emmaus encounter a stranger who “*appeared to be going further.*” Those of us who are mere mortals seem to be left in the wake of this Jesus on the move.

As we celebrate this Palm Sunday, we recognize it as a day of mixed emotions. Our emotions are mixed *because we know the rest of the story.* Even as we celebrate that exciting entry into Jerusalem, we sense the darkening clouds of hate and hostility which would follow Jesus that last week in Jerusalem, and which would eventually bring the cross. "Jesus was killed by an imperial Juggernaut, into which almost everyone was swept up in great enthusiasm," writes Stephen Patterson. "His death had nothing to do with the struggle between Judaism and Christianity. It had to do with the struggle between those who have power and those who do not; between those who enjoy easy access to food, clothing, housing and various of life's pleasures and those who must make do without almost everything; between those who live at the center of things and those who exist at the margins. Jesus offered a word of

**criticism, shot like an arrow from outside the city wall into the heart of his culture. His word hit home, and it stung. For that he was killed."**

**We will not have a "Good Friday" worship service, where the execution of Jesus becomes our focus. It is important to realize, however, that the cross is always going to be central to Jesus' story, and that we cannot just go from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the Easter resurrection a week later, not recognizing the agony found in between.**

**Today, however, we pause to cheer...to wave, and to say "Hosanna!" We acclaim the Prince of Peace who comes riding into our lives to change them forever. We cheer the belief that God's Kingdom is within each of us—a Kingdom in which we journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. As his Galilean followers were called to go with him 2,000 years ago, so today his followers are likewise called to go with him, and in him, to the Jerusalems of today's world. Such a journey is not just a journey to make us feel good. To be with this**

**Jesus on the move means that we are called to live a *new way*, a way that challenges the principalities and powers by which the world is governed. We believe that this new way challenges those things our culture takes for granted, and are counter to the culture that Jesus represents. This new way incorporates the Testimonies of *Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality and Stewardship of the Earth*, and that as followers of Jesus, we are called to invite others to this *new way of life*.**