

Let the Power Fall
April 17, 2011
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It must have sounded like a storm was coming. Like distant thunder rolling and slowly gaining strength. Eventually a flash of color would poke over the horizon amid the growing sound. Bright in the sun, shining gold, bobbing up and down. Then a peek of deep crimson would join in. Soon an eagle standard would be visible—secured to a tall pole, with a flowing banner undulating to the rhythm of the procession. The pole and standard would be connected to a state of the art chariot, decked out in symbols of the empire, and pulled by a mighty warhorse. The standard would name a legion or proclaim a slogan of the empire in tall letters unknown to most people.

The driver would be covered in armor—either boiled leather or hammered metal, formed to look like a muscular man’s chest, or better still a demigod—intimidating and powerful . On his head, a plumed helmet, beside him a spear at the ready, a viscously sharp short sword strapped to his belt. There would likely be many drivers, each of their chariots adding to the thunderous din.

And there would be soldiers riding horses, too, similarly armed and fierce looking. Foot soldiers would march along among them, ordered by rank, moving in lockstep. They may appear somewhat less polished, but they were no less ready for battle. Trumpets would resound with marching music, which would slowly assert itself above the cacophony of the rolling and thundering horse hooves. The tunes were foreign and showy, bold and mighty.

Then, somewhere in the massive march, the diplomat would be visible—regal and imposing, and decorated like a conquering warrior. Perhaps a laurel held behind his head to symbolize this just a little bit more. It could not be overstated. When Rome rolled into its occupied territories, they demonstrated clearly that they were in charge. Rome was in power, and they guarded that power tightly, keeping it in the hands of the few, the rich and the Roman, or at least Roman approved patsies. If it had been awhile since their last visit they might well assert their power with terrible violence. Mass crucifixions were not uncommon, and were often visited on complete innocents. Hundreds might die just to show that Rome maintained a firm grip on power.

Certain regions needed more frequent visits to maintain order. Jerusalem was just such a place. As a city which was holy to the Jewish people, it would virtually overflow with visitors at the time of religious festivals. And that could mean trouble. While the Roman authorities respected the Jewish people for the antiquity of their faith, they were concerned with many of their religious stories and traditions.

The Jews told stories about being liberated by their God from oppressive powers. Not just once, either. God liberating them was basically the recurring theme in their history. God delivered the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt, and brought them together to become the nation of Israel in a land that was new to them. Babylon, Persia and Greece had all controlled Israel previously. And every time God deliver them from imperial rule. And this deliverance was brought about through prophets—certain individuals acting and speaking in God’s name who lead the people back into God’s care and out of the power of the great empires of the world.

Now Rome was the empire which lorded over Israel. And the Jews were telling and retelling their stories of liberation...especially during the festival of Passover, which recounted their deliverance from Egypt—the very events which formed them as a people and gave them an identity. And there was talk of prophets rising up, too. Not just Jesus, although perhaps especially him.

Rome would need to keep an eye on all that. The Roman authorities would have to assure that talk of liberation would remain idle chit chat, and that power remained in the hands of the few, the rich and the Roman, or at least Roman approved. So, sometime prior to this—the day we have come to call Palm Sunday—the Romans would have sent in their troops in a big, thunderous show of force, marching extra troops right into the heart of Jerusalem. And Jesus knew it. Like all the Jewish people in Israel then, he had grown up under Roman rule. They all knew about the pageantry; the pomp; the military parades that took place around the time of important Jewish religious festivals. They would most likely expect them.

Many scholars and pastors suggest that Jesus not only *expected* the showy Roman entry into Jerusalem, but that he was deliberately making fun of it in his own entrance into the Holy City. Now, this morning’s passage from Matthew tells us plainly that the particular circumstances of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem fulfill scripture when it reads:

This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”¹

So, Jesus was certainly working from within his tradition. Yet, I see a both/and situation here—Jesus was *both* referencing his own Jewish scripture *and* providing a stinging critique of Rome. It goes further, too. There is a third layer. I see a clear demonstration of the differences between the true Holy power of God and the supposed imperial power of Rome.

¹ Matthew 21:4-5.

Consider these contrasts between the way the Roman Empire enters Jerusalem and the way Jesus does. Rome storms into town decked out in military finery and literally ready to go to war. There are many sets of brightly polished armor, well armed soldiers, war steeds, chariots, standards, and even a theme song or two played out in brass. Jesus rides into town on a donkey—a symbol of peace and an inversion of a war steed. He is dressed so unremarkably that it is not even mentioned. Instead of being armed for conquering in war, he is literally on the road to lay down his life. As he has been throughout Lent, Jesus is walking on the way of sorrows; the path to the cross; the *via dolorosa*. Instead of being surrounded by throngs of military escorts, he is accompanied only by his Disciples, who in turn attract what Matthew calls a “very large crowd.”² There is a notable difference between this crowd and the one who would have greeted the Roman parade. Whereas the Romans took things from the crowds they dominated, this crowd brings things to Jesus—coats and branches as Matthew says—which shows us exactly who these people are—they are dirt poor. There is no gold and finery here. These are not the few, rich and Roman or Roman approved. Their coats are probably one of their few possessions; a fact underscored by their other offerings of cut branches—something people of no means could actually afford. These people bring something else to Jesus, too—freely offered praise. Instead of an imperial marching band, Jesus is serenaded by shouts of Hosanna—“save us!” Instead of being greeted in fear and suspicion as the Empire would be, Jesus is greeted with adoration and hope for liberation.

This morning’s Call to Worship comes from the letter to the Philippians. It includes an ancient Christian hymn. It illustrates how divine power stands in contrast to imperial power. The key line is this; even though Jesus “was in the form of God, (he) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, *but emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”³ Whereas Romans and other empires concentrate power in the hands of the few, God brings holy power into human hands specifically to serve other humans—it is something to be shared. God becomes a slave to humanity through Jesus according to the ancient Christian hymn of the Philippians. Whereas ancient Romans kept power over and above others, God lets the power fall into human hands. Because God seeks to work through us and among us—first through Jesus, and now through us as the Body of Christ in the world.

We are right to celebrate Jesus as our savior and to speak of his entry into Jerusalem as a triumph. But we must do so conscious of the irony of that word. It is the very same term that the Roman Empire used to label its own militaristic processions—their shows of violent power. And their sense of power was to keep it out of the hands of the many. Jesus demonstrates a completely other power—the power of divine self-emptying that leads to serving, loving and healing others in order to let God’s power fall into more and more hands. Not just Romans and

² Matthew 21:8.

³ Philippians 2:6-7.

the Roman approved, but indeed the outcast and downtrodden, people of all backgrounds; the many, not the few. No matter where we are on life's journey, God calls us to love and serve others just as God has done through Jesus Christ.

This is God plan. This is what makes the Kingdom of God different from human empires. The question before us this morning, as we stand perched on the edge of Holy Week together, is whose power do we crave: the power of empire and power over others, or the transforming power of God-with-us?

It is in serving and loving others that we find our true liberation, deliverance and salvation; because that service calls us into full and deep relationships with other people and God. And if we are all able to join in that work with open hearts and open souls, then God's holy power will fall upon us, work through us and return to God over and over again in an endless cycle of grace. It will be as above, so below—on earth as it is in heaven...

Amen.

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” ⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” ¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Philippians 2:5-11

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.