

Marching to Jerusalem

Mark 11:1-11

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by The Reverend Dr. Gay Lee Einstein

With Palm Sunday we are approaching the end of our Lenten Journey. As I have looked back over the scripture passages we have studied thus far on our Sunday mornings together, and as I have also considered my sermon topics during Lent, I realize that I have preached quite a bit about the nature of God's grace. I have also preached about how that grace was becoming even more apparent with Jesus' announcement of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. However, I have left off preaching about politics entirely. That is not wrong, exactly, but as we approach Easter we need to divert our focus from God's grace to God's politics. Certainly God is a political God. From the very early chapters of the Old Testament forward we learn that our God is a God of justice. God favors the oppressed and works to achieve their freedom from political oppression. Christianity, at least as much and probably more than other religions I am aware of, is a political religion. That is, it started out as a political movement. If we do not understand the politics that so much influenced Jesus' message and motive, then we fail to understand Jesus. In this country, as much as we try to keep to Thomas Jefferson's ideal of separating religion from politics, that ideal is a pipe dream. The two are deeply enmeshed. . Mahatma Gandhi was right on when he said, "Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is."

So this week and next, I would like to spend some time talking about the political situation in Judea and how that led to Jesus' arrest, death, and later to the rise of Christianity as a new religion. If I do my job right, we will be able to draw some parallels between politics in first century Judea and political situations in our 21st century world.

We need to start our review of the political scene in first century Judea, with a look back to 63 BC. That is when Jerusalem and all of Judea was swallowed up by the Roman Empire. The best definition of empire I could find that suits our purposes here comes from Dr. Paul Schroeder, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Illinois. He defines empire as political control exercised by one organized political unit over another unit separate from and alien to it." Dr. Schroeder continues: "Many factors enter into empire—[including] economics, technology, ideology [and] religion... ." Rome had a well thought out political strategy for growing its Empire. Rome overtook a region by force, and then it maintained control over that region by allowing a degree of self-rule by leaders who professed loyalty to Rome. That is how a local boy,

Herod, came to rule Judea in 34 BC. Herod understood well the rules of Empire building. He executed the then current ruling elite and he replaced them with other Judeans who agreed to pledge allegiance both to him and to Rome. Herod bought these new rulers' continued loyalty by giving them land he confiscated when we took office. In the process Herod created not only a new class of ruling elites, but also a new and growing class of the landless poor.

After Herod's death there was a brief power vacuum in Judea. Peasant Judeans saw this is as an opportune time to retake their holy city from Rome. We know that two thousand of these peasant revolutionaries were crucified about the year 4 BC. **Note that crucifixion was reserved exclusively for those who challenged Rome's authority.**

After that uprising, Rome decided to rule Jerusalem through Roman governorships. Pilate was one in a series of governors appointed for this purpose. At this time, Rome decided that **local** leadership should go to the temple authorities—at least those temple authorities who were willing to pledge allegiance to Rome. It became their duty to collect not only the temple tax, but also to assure the collection of the annual tribute to Rome. As was the custom, these new political leaders, that is, priests and scribes, were given land grants to assure their continued loyalty. You can see, then, why Jesus had nothing good to say about either priests or scribes.

Now here we need to pause and consider. Like I said at the beginning of this sermon, “Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is.” With the priests and scribes in Rome's pocket so to speak, Rome's oppression and economic exploitation were legitimated, or seemingly blessed, by God. That is often how political power structures use religion—to legitimate their power. In Jesus' day, then, religion had EVERYTHING to do with politics!

With that we have this background information, we are ready to turn to our scripture passage for today. Scholars tell us that Jesus' approach toward Jerusalem astride a donkey probably happened in or around the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, which is considered the most sacred week of the Jewish year. Jewish pilgrims would have been coming to the holy city literally in droves. Jerusalem's population grew from 40,000 (about the size of Charlottesville) to 250,000 (about the size of Washington, DC). Another group of people, besides pious Jews, which included Jesus and his followers, were coming to Jerusalem for Passover as well. These were Roman soldiers headed by Pontius Pilate. Pilate lived in a magnificent palace in Caesarea Maritima 60 miles outside Jerusalem. Think seaside resort city with white sandy beaches, fine dining and fun in the sun. For this special week, though, Pilate tore himself away from resort living. Believe me when I tell you: Pilate and his troops did not have worship or sightseeing in mind. They were coming to keep order. They were

a police force of sorts, or more precisely, an occupation force. They were not invited, nor was their presence appreciated by the Jews.

Jesus had been preaching about God's kingdom which was really a negative image to Rome: In GOD's kingdom (as opposed to the Roman Empire) there was no such thing as oppression or injustice. In God's negative image kingdom the poor and persecuted and loved by God and shall be vindicated. We can see why so many people, particularly peasants, were attracted to Jesus' message.

So, you've got Jesus and his followers marching under the banner of the kingdom of God and winding their way up to Jerusalem from the East; and you have Pilate's military procession marching under the banner of the Roman Empire and winding its way up to Jerusalem from the West. It was inevitable that there would be an eventual meeting and showdown of these two so very different parties right smack in the middle of Jerusalem.

Often in my mind I have thought of Jesus' palm Sunday march as a 1st century version of Macy's New Year's Day parade, only instead of confetti, palm branches and instead of colorful, flower-studded floats, one lousy donkey. I've also thought of it as more or less a spontaneous affair; as if the humble Jesus was as surprised as anyone that so many people decided to cheer him on as he approached the city. That is probably very wrong. Someone has suggested that Jesus' entry was less like a parade and more in the line of a non-violent protest march—a **carefully orchestrated** non-violent protest march. You have clues for that interpretation right here in our text. Jesus had prearranged for a colt to be ready and waiting for him to ride. Jesus goes to the temple to "case the joint." He is planning for his return the following day, when he will overturn the tables. If we need more proof of Jesus' careful planning, we can look back at his career to this point. He had been doing most of his teaching in provincial areas, that is, under the radar screen of the Romans and the Empire affiliated temple scribes and priests. Jesus had been quietly amassing a following of poor, disenfranchised peasants who are primed for another rebellion.

As we consider Jesus' march up to Jerusalem from the East, and Pilate's march up to that same city from the West, the question that comes to my mind and maybe yours as well, is, "Was Jesus a fool?"

That is probably a shocking question to ask in a Christian house of worship, yet, it needs to be asked. I think the answer is yes. . Yes, certainly he WAS a fool. He had a slim to

none chance of winning in any confrontation against the Roman authorities who were also marching toward Jerusalem. But he was also a genius, a courageous genius. He was leading a band of unarmed peasants, probably a very large band of unarmed peasants, toward a showdown in the middle of Jerusalem. It may have been foolhardy but Jesus had numbers on his side. That, and though he may not have had Rome's might, Jesus was in the right. He knew that God's law tilts toward the oppressed, therefore, Jesus was marching with God. In this, Jesus was not unlike Martin Luther King, Jr.. King, remember, led a non-violent march on Selma to protest unfair voting rights for Blacks; Jesus was not unlike Mahatma Gandhi, either. Remember, in 1930 Gandhi led a 200 mile Indian protest march against the British government's unjust salt tax. Jesus was no different from these great men, except that as far as I am aware, Jesus is the one who invented the concept of non-violent protest marches. As improbable as it is that a non-violent protest march could EVER succeed, sometimes, as we know, it actually does succeed.

That is where I want to leave us today because I don't want to spoil our Tenebrae Service and it is too soon to set our sights on Resurrection. We will pick up the story on Thursday and we will conclude our story on Easter Sunday.

However, that doesn't mean I've finished. I said at the beginning of this sermon that I wanted to draw some comparisons between 1st Century Judea and our own 21st century world.

These days the United States is commonly regarded as an empire and what we are about in the Middle East is commonly referred to as empire building. I don't think anyone seriously disputes that. Remember, Dr. Schroeder says that "empire is about political control exercised by one organized political unit (here we can add comma, the US) over another unit separate from and alien to it" (comma, Iraq) and that "Many factors enter into empire—economics (i.e., oil), technology (i.e., new technological weapons), ideology (democracy vs. autocracy) [and] **religion** (our legitimating religious right,)." The only thing that people seriously debate is whether our U.S. empire building is for good or for evil. I leave that for you to decide. However, I will tell you this. Given the background information we have on the political times of Jesus, I think it is safe to say that there is no such thing as **Christian** Empire. That is an oxymoron, just like clean dirt, jumbo shrimp, anxious patient and same difference. Christian and Empire are contradictions in terms.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is." We can't afford to be naïve on this point. Make no mistake. Religion is ALWAYS about politics. Either it is legitimating political power or it is

opposing it.

Two processions entered Jerusalem at the beginning of the Jews' holy week. One was led by Jesus under the banner of God's kingdom, the other was led by Pilate under the banner of the Roman Empire. They are primed for a showdown smack in the middle of Jerusalem. Join us on Thursday for the continuing saga. Amen

*Many of the facts for this sermon come from a new book published this year. It is entitled **The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem**. It is written by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan.