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Mark 11.1-11
“Palms, Peace and Passion”

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week. History records that two processions going into Jerusalem took place at this time: Jesus on a donkey and the Romans on the march.

New Testament scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, tell the story of the processions in their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*.

They say, “Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. In the centuries since, Christians have celebrated this day as Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. With its climax of Good Friday and Easter, it is the most sacred week of the Christian year.

“One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north. Mark's story of Jesus and the kingdom of God has been aiming for Jerusalem. It has now arrived.

“On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of the empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus's crucifixion.

“Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology.

“Though unfamiliar to most people today, the imperial procession was well known in the Jewish homeland in the first century. Mark and the community for which he wrote would have known about it, for it was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals. They did so not out of empathetic reverence for the religious devotion of their Jewish subjects, but to be in the city in case there was trouble. There

often was, especially at Passover, a festival that celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire.

"The mission of the troops with Pilate was to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed in the Fortress Antonia, overlooking the Jewish temple and its courts. They and Pilate had come up from Caesarea Maritima, "Caesarea on the Sea," about sixty miles to the west. Like the Roman governors of Judea and Samaria before and after him, Pilate lived in the new and splendid city on the coast. For them, it was much more pleasant than Jerusalem, the traditional capital of the Jewish people, which was inland and insular, 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...of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.

"Pilate's procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God. It began with the greatest of the emperors, Augustus, who ruled Rome from 31 BCE to 14 CE. His father was the god Apollo, who conceived him in his mother, Atia. Inscriptions refer to him as "son of God," "lord" and "savior," one who had brought "peace on earth." After his death, he was seen ascending into heaven to take his permanent place among the gods. His successors continued to bear divine titles, including Tiberius, emperor from 14 to 37 CE and thus emperor during the time of Jesus's public activity. For Rome's Jewish subjects, Pilate's procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology.

"We return to the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem. Although it is familiar, it has surprises. As Mark tells the story in 11:1-11, it is a prearranged 'counter-procession.' Jesus planned it in advance. As Jesus approaches the city from the east at the end of the journey from Galilee, he tells two of his disciples to go to the next village and get him a colt they will find there, one that has never been ridden, that is, a young one. They do so, and Jesus rides the colt down the Mount of Olives to the city surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic followers and sympathizers, who spread their cloaks, strew leafy branches on the road, and shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" . . . This looks like a planned political demonstration.

"The meaning of the demonstration is clear, for it uses symbolism from the prophet Zechariah in the Jewish Bible. According to Zechariah, a king would be

coming to Jerusalem (Zion) “humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (9:9). In Mark, the reference to Zechariah is implicit. Matthew, when he treats Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem, makes the connection explicit by quoting the passage: “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 (Matthew. 21:5, quoting Zechariah, 9:9). The rest of the Zechariah passage details what kind of king he will be:

‘He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.’ (9:10)

“This kind, riding on a donkey, will banish war from the land – no more chariots, war-horses, or bows. Commanding peace to the nations, he will be a king of peace.

“Jesus’s 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 that ruled the world. Jesus’s procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God. This contrast – between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar – is central not only to the gospel of Mark, but also to the story of Jesus and early Christianity.

“The confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus’s life. The week ends with Jesus’s execution by the powers who ruled his world. Holy Week is the story of this confrontation.”

The religious classes in Jerusalem were vassals of the Roman Empire whose primary task was to keep the peace. For survival they bought in to the so-called “domination system” of the Romans. They saw Jesus as a threat to the peace. To avoid massive unrest it became expedient to kill this one person.

That’s the biblical story of this week. What, we may ask, is its relevance for today?

On a personal level, Jesus represents a peaceful and loving alternative to violence in us and to all that would dominate us.

On a social level: Jesus rides into society to offer that peace which for him included justice.

On a national and global level, we look to places that are occupied by dominant forces. Iraq and Palestine are cases in point. The US and Israel are perceived as the modern-day Romans. Where is Jesus in this context? He is riding, humble on a donkey, representing peace with justice outside (and inside) the halls of Congress and the Knesset, outside Baghdad, Afghanistan, and Darfur.

He opposes dominant systems everywhere. Scholars say that Jesus preached an anti-imperial gospel. No wonder he was in trouble with the Romans later in the week. This same gospel speaks to the imperialism of our age and any age, whether conducted by the US, Israel or any dominant power.

As we cry, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” and “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” let us continue to wrestle with what Holy Week really means and how this plays into our lives and world today. Amen.