

A sermon by the Reverend Sr. Sarah Randall, SSM in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Crucify him!

A crowd cheers Jesus on as he rides into Jerusalem. "Hosanna!" they cry, spreading their cloaks in front of him, a sort of first century red carpet welcome appropriate for a king.

A few short days later, the crowd is shouting, "Crucify him!"

Matthew says, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'"

Well might we ask along with them: Who IS this who provokes such strong and disparate reactions?

The crowd in the city answered, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

It is, however, a question each one of us will have to answer for herself.

What does what we see in Jesus during this holiest of weeks tell us about him and therefore about God?

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When we first greet Jesus on Palm Sunday, we see him in the role of a king, as prophesied by Zechariah:

"Tell the daughter of Zion,

Look, your king is coming to you,

humble, and mounted on a donkey"

Jesus fulfills the prophecy, and those who shout with gladness are filled with hope. Is this the long-awaited messiah?

Already, however, we see signs of Jesus' plans, plans which differ from those hopes. While he does indeed fulfill the prophecy, as they recognize, he has no intention of mounting a military coup against the Roman occupation, as many assume the messiah will do. His plans, of course, are of much larger scope, but also of diametrically opposed means. Consider the image of Jesus the King, "humble and mounted on a donkey," and contrast it with the vision of an approaching Roman army on huge warhorses, armor and weapons shining in the sun.

Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed One, comes to Jerusalem filled with a power that turns our notions of power upside-down. He does not meet the expectations of the crowd. Perhaps he does not meet Judas' expectations, either, for the drama plays out, and we next meet him this morning in front of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate, of course, has heard the stories from those who turned him in, and probably from his own intelligence reports from around the city as well. "Are you the King of the Jews?" he asks. Jesus' only response is, "You say so." No further defense. No impassioned speeches, neither pleas nor exhortation of the crowd. Instead, simple dignity that does not play games. Again, he does not meet expectations. What kind of a messiah is this who won't even tell off the Romans when he is given the stage? Pilate, amazed but not entertained, makes cynical use of the Jewish custom of washing hands to proclaim innocence, and hands him off to the soldiers. You can almost imagine the shrug. So much for another rebel. One more public execution, one more example to the crowds of why it is never a good idea to stand up to the Roman occupation and its unequaled military machine.

Where is Jesus' power? Where is the Almighty hand of God blasting in with imagery worthy of a blockbuster action film? What a disappointment.

Instead, we see an execution designed to maximize not only pain, but also humiliation – naked prisoners displayed for the public like billboards warning against revolution. What kind of a king is this? What kind of a messiah?

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul quotes a hymn, one of the earliest descriptions of the answer to this question.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
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.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

Instead of climbing the ladder, Jesus descends. God upends our notions of power and privilege, of status and might. Instead, we see God's strength poured out on behalf of others, willingly taking on their pain and poverty, their needs and even their mortality. That is to say, our pain, our poverty, our needs, our mortality. God's strength is REAL strength. We see this in Jesus during Holy Week not despite his trial and execution, but displayed all the more clearly therein. This is not weakness or timidity. Quite the contrary. It takes incredible strength to be nonviolent, even verbally. In Jesus, we see no compromise with violence. He does not cave in to the pressure and fear, comply with injustice, or walk away from the truth in order to save his own skin. For us he lived, and for us he died. And one thing the bystanders at his execution got right: He trusted in God to the very end. Even his agonized, heart-wrenching cry on the cross – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" – was a prayer, quoting from Psalm 22. This, too, Jesus took on and offered up for us -- this, our sense of abandonment when God does not meet our expectations and we fear that he has left us hanging, as it were.

A different sense of power, a different sense of kingship, indeed.

There is one last note of irony in this series of reversals: the one who perceives Jesus' true identity is part of the violence himself. As a centurion, he has seen hundreds of crucifixions before which, on the surface, would look just like this one. Yet he, of all people, sees something in Jesus at his death that impels him in its aftermath to declare, "Truly this man was God's Son." Having experienced this, did he and his companions seek to learn more of who Jesus was? Will we?

This week in particular, this holiest of weeks, we are invited to walk with Jesus in real time through the events of the last days of his life. Maundy Thursday, we are invited to join the disciples in a last meal, to watch with them in the garden – perhaps even, with them, to find ourselves falling asleep. Good Friday we are summoned to attend his trial. We steel ourselves to stay at the crucifixion along with the few courageous women who dare to risk it and who can stand up under the burden of grief and pain. Can we walk with Jesus this week? Can we stay with him as he stays with us? For one thing we learn for certain this week: Though we, like the crowds, may be changeable as the wind, God's purpose for the world is steadfast. Though we, like the disciples, may in fear forsake him and flee, God will never forsake us, pouring out his strength and his life on our behalf. Though our love flickers at times, God's love shines bright through the darkness.

Come, this week of all weeks, to stay with the One who has promised always to stay with us, until the story is complete.