

Homily for Palm Sunday 2018

Most of us like to take part in or watch processions. Anzac Day processions attract great crowds. The procession of palms of Palm Sunday as we observe it is tiny in comparison to such events. But our commemoration recalls a significant event on Jesus' way, his journey to Jerusalem. The preparations he made for his entry tell us that he knew well what he was doing. He knew it was dangerous to enter the city as his enemies were on the lookout for him. So he sent two disciples to get the donkey. Nevertheless, word got around from those who were already on the road with him. They quickly cut branches in readiness. He was clearly wanting to make a statement.

You may remember that there are two cities called Caesaria in Palestine in Jesus' day. One in the north of Galilee called Caesaria Philippi where Peter made his famous confession of faith. The other was Caesaria Maritima, a port city fifty km north of today's Tel Aviv, built by Herod the Great who also built the great Temple. When Herod the Great's son was deposed by the Romans a governor was put in charge. In Jesus day that was Pontius Pilate. In Caesaria a Roman garrison was kept in readiness. Festivals were volatile times as Jewish as riots against Roman rule could break out. At such times, like Passover, Pilate would lead a body of soldiers to the old city of Jerusalem.

Why all this detail? Because just at the very time Pilate was leading his troops into Jerusalem Jesus was riding his donkey to the cheers of the people into the city as well. Pilate and his Imperial army came from the West upholding the Kingdom of the divine Caesar. Jesus with his peasant followers from the East from the Mount of Olives announcing a Kingdom of God. This prophetic action of Jesus would not have been lost on the crowd as a challenge to Rome. It seems to be a deliberate, though non violent, provocative act. Just as deliberate as the actions of the prophets throughout Jewish history (cf Jeremiah 19). Jesus would be familiar with the words of the Prophet Zecharia 9:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

In a similar way, John the Baptist's baptism prophetically sidelined the claims of the Temple that it was the place where God could be encountered and forgiveness obtained.

The Temple priests were appointed by Rome. They had to make sure that the taxes owed to Rome were forthcoming. The Temple authorities were in an unenviable position. They owed their position and wealth to Caesar yet they were supposed to uphold Jewish faith in God's promises to his people. Obviously, then they were seen as collaborators with Rome and were targets for any Zealot uprising. It is no wonder that Jesus was executed. But we must not suppose that the people who welcomed Jesus on this occasion changed their minds and sought his crucifixion. The peasants would not have even been allowed to enter the Fortress of Antonio where Jesus trial before Pilate was held. No, it was the Temple authorities and their supporters whose position and power and wealth was at risk who wanted his removal. Prophets are always dangerous people to the status quo. Jesus did not preach about himself. His message was always about God's reign and his obedience to proclaim it.

At baptism which we will celebrate once again at the Easter Vigil we anoint people as sharing in the priestly, prophetic and kingly ministry of Christ. The prophetic role of Jesus is echoed in our readings today. His commitment to non-violence in our first reading: “For my part, I made no resistance, neither did I turn away. I offered my back to those who struck me, my cheeks to those who tore at my beard; I did not cover my face against insult and spittle.” And His obedience to the Father in Paul's famous hymn: “His state was divine, yet Christ Jesus did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.”

Can we follow, living prophetic lives? Not riding donkeys down Currie St perhaps. But simply by the witness of our lives. Taking the hard road not letting vindictiveness and revenge take root in us and in our relationships.

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