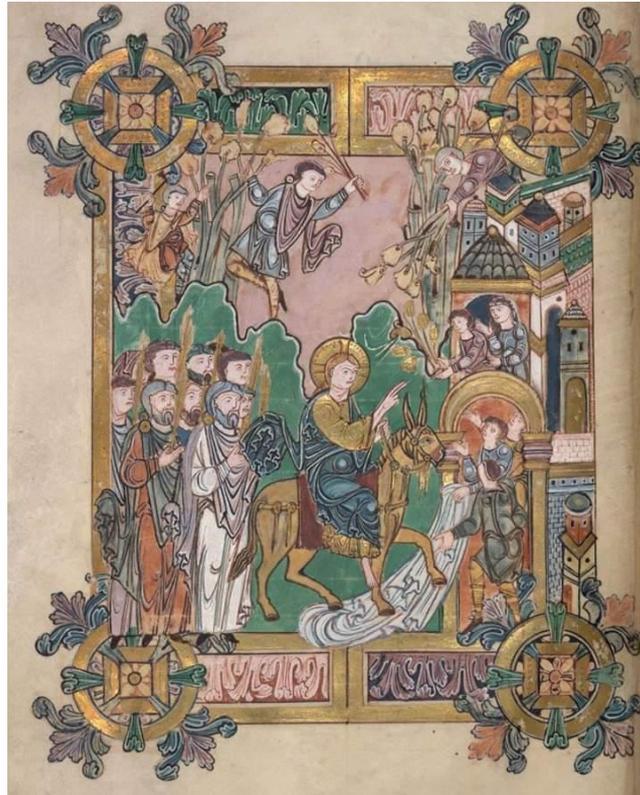


Prophetic street theatre for peace



Sixth Sunday in Lent - Luke 19:28 – 40 The Liturgy of the Palms



We are conditioned by the account of Jesus entry into Jerusalem in the versions by Matthew and Mark. Even the name of this day comes from those accounts. When we come to Luke, it's a bit different. No mention of palms or even leafy branches, no mention of David. And, if you read the account literally, the procession doesn't even enter the city! All the parading, the cloaks on the ground and the singing of Psalms happens up on the Mount of Olives. It all seems to fizzle out when Jesus starts weeping over the city and its fate. Some, like Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, have tried to explain the entry into Jerusalem as political street theatre, a swipe at the grand parade of Pontius Pilate as the liberator of the city. Luke's account calls for other interpretations. After all, he was writing to Rome, people who knew all about grand parades of conquering heroes into the city, you think he would have followed Mark's story and explicitly described the parade on the donkey entering the city. Luke, it seems, has a different intent in mind. Rather than lampooning Pilate in political street theatre, Luke gives us Jesus taunting Jerusalem with prophetic street theatre. The hint of politics is there with the complaint from some Pharisees – most probably a warning about angering the Romans, because it does look like a political act – but Jesus answer to them

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makes it clear that this about God's way and God's plan. Jesus is coming to Jerusalem in the name of Lord and even the stones in the road are eagerly awaiting this cosmic event.

It's obvious that Jesus knew what he was doing and carefully set up this bit of prophetic theatre. There are more verses devoted to finding the donkey than to the actual ride. He calls for a donkey to make the connection to the prophecy from Zechariah, "Lo, your king comes to you humble and riding on a donkey", so this looks to be about Jesus as the new king. The action of the crowd in throwing down their cloaks for Jesus looks to be about recognising Jesus as the new king. Luke changes the passage from the Psalm, "Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord", so that looks to be about Jesus as the new king. But then Luke's telling of the story shifts. Just like the prophets of old, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who used street theatre to lift people's ideas above the immediate and obvious to grasp God's ideas, Jesus is using this bit of street theatre to lift people above the idea of a new king like David.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord
Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.

The crowds cry of "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven" is a reply to the angels' proclamation to the shepherds at Jesus birth! This is about the Messiah, the Promised One of God who is to be the Saviour. Luke is referencing one of his own stories! The earthly ideas of king are not enough. The long-promised saviour has come and if the people don't recognise him, the stones in the road will shout out the same blessing. The people in Bethany and Bethpage, disciples and pilgrims for the Passover are singing praise to God for all the wonders they have seen in Jesus ministry; blessed is the One who has come and who has ministered in the name of the Lord. This bit of theatre was emphasising that Jerusalem has always rejected God and God's ways; "You will not see me until *you* say, 'Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.'

The exploration of politics with the threat of a Jewish king to the Roman rule, and the desire of the religious leaders to hold onto what power they had, is helpful in explaining the crucifixion. But there is much more than politics in the story of Jesus and what happened when he went to Jerusalem. Some may have been thrilled to welcome a new king, some were anxiously waiting for the Messiah, some may have been looking for the new kingdom in the terms of Jeremiah's promise of the Law written on the heart, or the dread Day of the Lord. When Jesus talks of the stones crying out, God's story cuts across all those expectations. This is something new, greater, wilder and more necessary than all the other expectations, something that references prophecy and at the same time creates a new prophecy of peace between heaven and earth. The Pax Christi and not the Pax Romani. The peace that comes through welcoming the humble servant king who goes to the cross to become the glorious risen one, the ruler of lives and not just nations. So, let's cast down our cloaks of guilt and pretence and follow Jesus praising God for all the wonders we have experienced and seen.

Rev Ross Pearce

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