

“A Different Power” – Lk 19:28-40 – Palm Sunday

It must have been tough to live in Jerusalem, or Judea, or Galilee in Jesus' day. That part of the world was then occupied by the military forces of the Romans, the super-troops of the day enforcing the world peace of the day. Although explosives were not yet readily available, the desires and actions of at least some of the people in the occupied countries of the Middle East would be recognizable if they were shown on CNN today. Small military patrols were vulnerable then as they still are now, even if the methods of ambush were considerably cruder and definitely more personal, since remote-control devices would not be invented for another two thousand years.

We don't have a lot of details about such resistance actions, or terrorist actions, depending on who was doing the recording, but we can be pretty certain that there was a constant state of disruption, turmoil and rebellion going on. Our certainty seems confirmed by the Romans eventually losing patience, and sending in a whole Legion of new troops to crush this ongoing opposition. The leveling of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70A.D. is historical witness to just how peeved the Romans had become, and the monumental siege ramp they built at Massada was testimony to just how determined they were to rid the world of the terrorists in that corner of their Empire.

So we can be pretty sure that both in Jesus' day, and even more so in the days that Luke wrote his gospel, that times were tough, and it didn't pay to make too much noise against the occupying coalition. Was it a coalition? Probably it was in the minds of the Romans, who forced smaller territories under their economic if not military power to provide troops or at least money to sustain the occupation. I doubt the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Judea, Galilee and the surrounding areas drew such a fine distinction – all they could see was the Imperial Eagle, and the nasty results of stepping out of line.

I suspect that tension of occupation is the key reason that Luke toned down his account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of that fateful week. And tone it down he did. The other gospel accounts have the familiar crowds, the whole multitudes of people, crying “Hosanna!”, and throwing leafy branches in front of Jesus. It is from John's gospel that we even get the detail of the branches being palms, from which this Sunday derives its name of Palm Sunday. Mark and Matthew both have the crowds referring to Jesus as David's descendant, and thus his implied replacement, while John has the crowd specifically identifying and proclaiming Jesus as King of Israel. Luke, however, tones his account way, way down. Here it is only the disciples who make an uproar, although it is a multitude of disciples. There are no branches, palm or otherwise, in Luke's account, and since the throwing of branches, especially palm branches, was reserved for royalty, or visiting Defense Secretaries and such like, we can only surmise that Luke wanted to play down the anti-establishment nature of the crowd's adulation of Jesus.

We have good support for our surmise, because Luke goes so far as to remove all references to David from the lips of the crowd, and even tones down the king thing. To be sure, they proclaim Jesus as king, but a small-‘k’ king, a religious king who comes in the name of the Lord, and immediately move to a declaration of peace.

More clearly an indication, however, of just how dangerous this display from the crowd was, was the reaction by the Pharisees. “Shhhh”, they told Jesus. “Get your gang to hush up”, they advised him. “Teacher, order your disciples to stop”, they told him. It was a dangerous time to be gathering as a crowd to proclaim a new king, and the Pharisees knew it. They also knew that their close association with the Roman occupiers meant that they themselves would come under pressure because of such demonstrations. Conscripted as collaborating agents of the Romans, the Pharisees were the ones who struggled in the ongoing war zone between the occupying forces and those who wanted their freedom.

Why did Luke tone down his account? I think it's a reflection that he was writing primarily to a gentile audience, to a faith community spread throughout the Roman Empire, who still lived under the strong and revenging thumb of the Romans. The early church to whom and for whom Luke penned his gospel struggled to survive in a world that was less tolerant than ever of perceived threats of terrorism, and the early church was seen as a subversive movement. The writing was on the wall, so to speak, and although the rebellion had been thoroughly crushed in Jerusalem and Judea by the time Luke's gospel circulated throughout the early church, it would not be long before these uppity Christians were being blamed for the burning of Rome itself, and would be mightily persecuted as a result of the false rumours. Not only here but elsewhere throughout his gospel Luke disassociates the Christian faith from any political or military movements.

But in case we, or any reader of the gospel, should come to the mistaken idea that the movement away from political or military rebellion meant that this new 'king' was weak or ineffective, Luke gives us Jesus' answer to the Pharisees who tried to hush the whole thing up. "If these [my disciples] were silent, the stones would shout out", he told them. The inference is clear: the real power behind Jesus was so strong that all nature could testify to him. No mere political king, no mere empty-star General, no mere civil servant in charge of a coalition, Jesus was a redeeming king to whom and about whom even the stones would proclaim. Where Mark and Matthew are silent on this issue, and John leaves the Pharisees confused, Luke is clear as a bell – there is no need to antagonize the oppressing occupiers, because this Jesus, fulfilling prophecy as he rides on the colt of a donkey, is truly the king in ways that the occupying bullies can never understand, and with whom they can never contend.

"It's a different power" is Luke's subtle message, a message that filled the early readers of his gospel with understanding and hope. Even though they were still sorely oppressed, were targeted for abuse because of their faith, the power of God in Jesus, a power strong enough to make creation testify to him, would guard them and keep them safe. No matter how many troops, no matter what the political structure, no matter what kind of oppression, the strength, the love, the compassion of Jesus demonstrated so clearly in his victorious resurrection could not be contained. Not the forces of the Roman Empire, not even the forces of death could subdue this new king was Luke's message to the early Christians, and to us.

That's an important message for us today. Although we live in a land of peace and plenty, we are, I think, wise enough to understand that things can change. At a personal level, if not a national level, we still contend with the forces that oppress. Those forces may be for us more internal than external; instead of ducking into doorways to avoid a patrol of soldiers we may have to take sudden refuge from those who would ambush us for who we are. We are no strangers to fear and insecurity, although the causes may be somewhat different from saints who have preceded us. Disease and distress are still all too familiar.

Familiar also is the refrain from scripture: "behold your king!" Look, see, observe in Jesus the one who was and is David's successor, the one anointed to head the Kingdom of God. For Luke this triumphant entry was a disciple event, heralded and proclaimed by those who heard, who listened to, who learned from, who followed and emulated Jesus. For us this is a disciple event also, as we take our place along the sidewalk, to proclaim in turn as Jesus comes into our view "Hosanna!", to shout along with all the others who have cried, and who will cry, and who are even this day crying out "blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" Blessed indeed also are we who are privileged to celebrate our non-political, non-military yet all-powerful king, even Jesus Christ, our Lord.