

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

1 Timothy 1:2 ...Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Two Processions”

John 12:12-19

I. Introduction: Procession of Palms

All of us choose a path in life. Today, I told the kids in the procession that if their parents were sitting on the left, they should go to the left. If their parents were sitting on the right, they should go right. Last night I was wondering about how this would work out. Would we have kids wandering around the sanctuary looking for their parents?

Today Gospel lesson is also about choosing a path, or more correctly, a procession. One procession moves from west to east. Another procession moves from east to west. These two processions are ready to collide.

II. Two Kingdoms Collide

What happens when kingdoms collide? Usually one kingdom will dominate the other. The more powerful military, the more technologically advanced, the economically stronger nation will take over the weaker one.

This is exactly what happened when Europeans came to America. Stone age people who did not have the wheel could not compete with Europeans who had navigational charts to help them sail accurately, mechanical clocks to measure time precisely, steel to protect their bodies from arrows and, of course, gunpowder when they needed it.

Occasionally, two roughly equal nations like France and Germany will exist side by side but with frequent, indecisive wars and many uneasy truces. This situation can't last forever. Even now France and Germany are merging into one nation as the two main powers behind the European Union. When two nations meet, they will either merge or one will dominate the other.

III. The Kingdom of the West

We all know that Rome, west of Jerusalem, was the most powerful empire the world at the time of Jesus. Rome is located 1,550 miles from Jerusalem. That's a long way even by today's standards. Imagine the logistics involved in taking care of that empire without cars, railroads, motorized shipping and so on.

Rome depended on tax revenue from its colonies to support its army, system of roads and so on. The most important task of any Roman governor was to get the tax money and put down any resistance to taxation.

The only way to do this was by what George Bush calls, "shock and awe." When the Romans come in, they come in hard. They come into town with heavy cavalry and thousands of legionnaires all trained to kill anyone who questioned their authority. When the Romans are in town, they run the town.

The way they process into town is designed to shock onlookers. They enter with a loud parade. They have trumpets blasting and drums pounding. The standard bearer with the Roman eagle goes before them. Each group of 100 soldiers has a standard with a golden hand that represented the oath they took as soldiers.

Finally, the image bearer comes. The image bearer is a soldier whose job is to carry an image of the emperor. Carrying an image of the emperor has strong pagan overtones. (The Roman emperors

were worshipped as gods and people were forced to kneel before their images and offer incense as a sacrifice.) Essentially, the image bearer's presence says that the emperor is your god, now worship him. Needless to say, this is extremely offensive to pious Jews.

Because the Passover is such a big festival, the Romans would send reinforcements before the feast days. They would come by ship from the Mediterranean and would march westward toward Jerusalem. Pontius Pilate would meet them in Caesarea Philippi and they would march together into the city (about 95 miles).

IV. The Kingdom of the East

From the east, another kingdom begins to march toward Jerusalem. This kingdom is not as impressive as the Roman Empire coming from the west. There are no soldiers, standards or trappings of imperial power. There are no horses or chariots – just one donkey and that had to be borrowed. There are no blasting trumpets or pounding drums, just children singing and waving palm fronds.

To anyone unfamiliar with the Hebrew Scriptures, there would be no question about who was the true king is. If Pontius Pilate represents just one of Caesar's legions, Caesar must be the true king. He seems to have all the power of the world at his command.

Yet here is the challenger riding a borrowed donkey leading another procession headed on a collision course with Rome. Only those with eyes of faith can see that this man is the true king.

The Hebrew Scriptures tell us who he is. Jews during this time were expecting that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem from the east based on a passage from Zechariah.

Zechariah 14:3 Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. 4 On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem...

It was from the Mount of Olives that Jesus sent his disciples to get the donkey. This was a way to tell the people of Jerusalem that he is the Messiah, the King from David's royal line.

The crowd responds by praising God and laying palm branches on the street. Palm branches are symbolic of military victory. The people loved Jesus because they thought he was going to take on the Roman army marching from the other side of town.

V. Prince of Peace

But this crowd doesn't fully understand the mission of the Messiah. The mission of the Messiah is not to engage in human warfare. His mission is to bring peace and healing by his death on the cross. By restoring humanity to a right relationship with God, he can bring an inner peace for each one of us. Only later, in the Second Coming will he bring an end to warfare.

The question for us today is this: Which procession are you in? Do you want to be in the procession from the West - the procession that has all the power and glory of this world? Do you want to have control over other people? Do you want wealth at all costs?

Or do you want to be in the procession from the East - the procession that has poverty, humility and peace? Do you want to walk with Jesus even if that means that you will have suffering in this life? Are you willing to sacrifice prestige and power now so that you can join Jesus' procession of peace?

VI. Conclusion: Two Processions Together

In this world, these two processions exist side by side. It would be nice if we could see who is a Christian because he walks from east to west and see who is not a Christian because he walks from west to east. But the reality is that we all live in this world together. Christians are in Jesus' kingdom already. Other people are outside it. Even as Christians, we don't always know who belongs to which kingdom.

Listen to Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds:

Matthew 13:24 ..."The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. 26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared...

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 29 "'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

We are now in a period of waiting – waiting to be gathered into God's barn. Meanwhile, we have to interact with those who are in that other procession. We will get pushed. We will get shoved. We will be mistreated. But in the process, we will pull some of them from that procession to God's procession.

Meanwhile, we continue to sing our hosannas because we know that in the end the Prince of Peace will prevail.

May that peace which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.