

Who Is this Prophet from Nazareth in Galilee?

Palm/Passion Sunday 2011 (A)

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" the crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."
(Matthew 21:10-11)

Biblical scholars Borg and Crossan wrote a book called *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*. They imagine what may have happened on that first Palm Sunday this way: "Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30." One procession comes into the city from the east, a procession composed of mostly peasants, following a certain Nazarean Galilean riding a donkey down from the Mount of Olives. On the opposite side of the city, from the west, approaches the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entering the city on a mighty war horse at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Pontius Pilate has come from Caesarea Maritima (on the Mediterranean Sea) for the purpose of maintaining law and order during the potentially tumultuous days of the Jewish festival of Passover, when Jerusalem's population of maybe 40,000 swelled to as many as 200,000 because of the pilgrims drawn to the temple. "Jesus' procession proclaims the kingdom of God," the authors note, while Pontius Pilate's proclaims the "power of empire." These opposing processions embody the "central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion."

Borg and Crossan go so far as to propose that Jesus and his followers intentionally staged this entry from the east as a "pre-arranged 'counter procession'" Before a public word had formed on his lips, Jesus and his crowd of commoners proclaim the kingdom of God over against the imperial cheers of those assembled on the other side of the city. Palm Sunday's roots lie in this alternative assembly of resistance to the power of empire. This is no Fourth of July parade with palms instead of flags. Our Palm Sunday marching song hymn, *All Glory, Laud and Honor*, is more akin to *We Shall Overcome* than to *God Bless America* or any national anthem. It does not celebrate victory so much as it voices resistance and protest.

Matthew tells us that Jesus enters Jerusalem when the whole city "was in turmoil" (v. 10). The word Matthew uses for "in turmoil" is the Greek root for the English word *seismic*, a shaking and trembling known all too well in Japan of late. The holy city is all shook up, with Passover in the center, Pontius Pilate coming to town

from one side to keep things under control, and Jesus coming from the other side to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah (9:9-10): where the triumphant king's coming is portrayed as that of a peaceful monarch "humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" who will "cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem."

"Who is this guy?" the Jerusalem crowd of pilgrims and residents want to know. "Who is this?" Matthew says this is what the whole city wants to know. The crowds were answering, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Notice that they do not say again, as they had with their Hosannas, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." They say only that Jesus was a prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. It will take the events of the week to come to answer the question more fully. "Who is this?" It will take the cleansing of the temple, the footwashing, the last supper, the betrayal and denial, the denunciation of violence at his arrest, the trial and mockery, the sentence and death and burial to fully answer the question, "Who is this?" Next Sunday we can better fill in the blanks around what kind of a prophet this Nazarean Galilean really is.

A recent hymn, increasingly sung at Reign of Christ the King Sunday in the fall, at the end of the church year, has these wonderful lyrics:

O Christ, what can it mean for us to claim you as our king?

What royal face have you revealed whose praise the church would sing?

Aspiring not to glory's height, to power, wealth and fame,

You walked a diff'rent, lowly way, another's will your aim.

(Delores Dufner, OSB)

The prophetic contrast between lowly donkey and mighty war horse begins to tell us what kind of king this Son of David is and will be. The imperial procession welcoming Pontius Pilate from his seaside palace in the west may have had officially issued flags to wave at their Roman governor. The counter procession of peasants on the other side of town used what was at hand, branches of the trees that lined the path from the Mount of Olives to the east gate. The imperial process may have rolled out a red carpet for the governor. The counter procession on the east side waved their branches and threw their cloaks on the path in front of the donkey, and shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David." Hosanna is one of those rare, untranslatable Aramaic words that appear in three of the four gospels (not Luke who was sensitive to his Greek Gentile audience). It probably means something like "save (or help) us." We don't know what was being shouted to Pontius Pilate

on the west side, but it may well have praised Caesar as emperor who claimed to have already saved his subjects.

One day, two different processions representing two different empires, that of Roman power and that of the kingdom of God, came at the already ancient holy city from two different directions. Only a little time will tell just how different those directions, processions, empires and powers are and will be. Only a little time will be required for these two “saviors” to wind their separate ways through the crowds of the city, with its pilgrims and residents, and bump into one another.

It will be on Pontius Pilate’s turf that they come face to face. (Fitting, of course, because Jesus has no turf.) You know the scene, first thing Friday morning. Jesus has been arrested on Thursday night, and taken to the high priest Caiaphas, where the scribes and elders were gathered as a Jewish supreme court to question Jesus. There, in the courtyard of the high priest’s house, Peter denies Jesus three times, and the rooster crows.

In Matthew’s account, that crowing ends one scene and sets the stage for the next: The council of scribes and elders determines that Jesus had uttered blasphemy when he said that the temple would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days. So they take him to Pontius Pilate to be sentenced to death, first thing in the morning.

Jesus stands before the governor who asks him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus says, “You have said so.” But when he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, Jesus made no answer. Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?” But Jesus gives him no answer, not even to a single charge; so that the governor wondered greatly. According to Matthew, Jesus did not utter another word until noon, when from the cross he cries out in the words of the 22nd psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus stands out in many ways, of course, throughout his passion. But standing before Pontius Pilate, the representative of Caesar, head of the vast Roman Empire, the greatest power on earth (the sole Superpower of the time), here Jesus has a priceless opportunity either to defend himself or to use that bully pulpit to bring the message of the kingdom of God to an audience which has never before been gathered around him. These were not the same people who had been among the five thousand fed by a few loaves of bread and pieces of fish. These had not heard the Sermon on the Mount, more than likely. But here and there these accusers had heard Jesus, looking for ways to trip him up and get ride of him, and now they are gathered all together, and Jesus can make his appeal and straighten out all the misunderstandings. It is a prophetic moment. (Even better than that temptation in the wilderness at the beginning, when the Tempter put Jesus on the pinnacle of the

temple and offered to give him the world.) I would defend myself, wouldn't you? I would cry "foul", wouldn't you? I would make my best case in front of the best possible assembly of movers and shakers in the old capital city. But here, with all these golden opportunities and wide open doors before him, Jesus does and says nothing. He yields to the power of Rome and lets go of his own message, his own agenda, his own life. He never said a mumblin' word, as the Negro Spiritual puts it. Who is this?

Recall the processions the weekend before from opposite directions. Jesus had spent Monday through Thursday with the little people, the poor, the widows, the orphans, the prostitutes, the lepers, the blind, the lame, the peasants, the hopeless. He walked among the poor in the marketplace and celebrated Passover with his disciples in a borrowed upper room. In the end, he took a bowl of water and knelt at his disciples' feet and washed them.

Pontius Pilate, on the other hand and from the far other side, had transferred from his seaside palace to his Jerusalem palace. Even though he regarded this place as godforsaken, his palace in Jerusalem was better than anyone else's home there, and he could continue his comfortable life in the court of a Roman official, hobnobbing with the powerful, the rich, the famous, the influential people, mostly the same people he kept around him at Caesarea. These were Caesar's people and he was Caesar's representative, even if it was Palestine. And in the end, he took a bowl of water and washed his hands of it all. Go ahead, crucify him.

The worlds of these two men could not have been more different.

The vision of the world's future that these two men offered could not have been more different.

Their means of reaching toward that future could not have been more different.

In some ways, the world of that moment of history is so far removed and different from our world today. No Roman Empire. No Pontius Pilate. No Jesus of Nazareth.

In other ways, our worlds are not so different. Empires rise and fall. Governors rise and fall. And this Jesus of Nazareth. Who is this guy?

Maybe we should follow him and find out. Today we join the procession, the "counter procession." Hosanna.