

“Parade, Protest March or Funeral Procession?”

Matthew 21:1-11

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Palm Sunday

He probably wondered why he was standing on the sidewalk with his mother on a cold November day. No one bothered to explain it to him because he was only a toddler. Whatever the reason, he noticed that he and his mother were not alone. Many others stood in the cold with them.

After a period of time, he saw people walking down the street in an orderly manner. When he saw a horse, he realized that he was there to watch a parade. “Parade, parade, parade!” he shouted with glee and started beating his toy drum. The fact that this was a riderless horse with boots turned backward in the stirrups meant nothing to this little boy.

Suddenly, his mother grabbed the drum and broke the sticks. “No, this is not a parade,” she exclaimed. “It is a funeral procession and you need to be quiet.”

It was not, however, just any funeral procession. It was November 25, 1963, and the funeral procession for the thirty-fifth President of the United States, John F. Kennedy.

If we were on the outskirts of Jerusalem the day Jesus rode into the Holy City on a donkey, would we have witnessed a parade or a funeral procession? Could we have been watching a protest march? Might it have been all three?

Dr. Fred Craddock raised these questions in a conference I recently attended. After listening to him, I believe we can make a case from Matthew’s perspective that the Palm Sunday procession was all three: a parade, a protest march and a funeral procession. Let me explain.

I am confident that Matthew viewed Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem as a parade with all the pomp and circumstance fit for a king. The Grand Marshall was riding on a donkey, a noble animal symbolizing peace instead of violence while people waved palm branches and shouted words of encouragement and praise. Without a doubt, this was a royal parade filled with pageantry and passion.

I’m not surprised that Matthew describes it this way. He loves to refer to Jesus as a king. “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” the wise men inquired of Herod in the birth narratives. From the outset, Matthew sets up the raw material for his gospel, and according to him, Jesus was a king.

This is certainly evident at the end of Jesus’ life, too. Prior to the crucifixion, the soldiers put a scarlet robe on Jesus, twisted together a crown of thorns and placed it upon his head. They knelt in front of him and mocked him by saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” On the cross, they attached a placard that read, “This is Jesus, King of the Jews.”

So, we would be correct in believing that for Matthew the Palm Sunday procession was a parade fit for a king. It truly was the triumphant entry into Jerusalem of a dignitary whose good work evoked an outpouring of love and appreciation.

I also believe that Matthew felt the people that day were watching a protest march. Those of us that lived in the ‘60’s are familiar with protest marches. We witnessed many during the struggle for Civil Rights or in reaction to the Vietnam War. Our cities burned and our college campuses were volatile.

I have no doubt that Matthew interpreted Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as a protest march, similar, but certainly different from those of the ‘60’s. What was the issue that aroused his passion? Against what was Jesus protesting? It was the same thing that the prophets of old protested and that was injustice.

In Matthew’s gospel, where did Jesus go upon entering Jerusalem that day? He went directly to the temple and drove out the money changers. In other words, he confronted the

religious leaders that were exploiting the poor and powerless and cleansed the temple of corruption, at least for a few hours.

Throughout the final week of his life, Jesus condemned the religious authorities for being greedy, self-serving and turning the temple into a den of thieves. He chastised them for using religion to feed their egos and addictions to comfort and power. He spoke truth to power and exposed their hypocrisy. He was not timid or shy, as a reading of Matthew 23 reveals. These “seven woes” directed at the religious leaders were the words of a courageous man on a noble mission.

They were also the words of a man that disagreed with religious authorities as to what was important and what people needed. In the words of Episcopal priest and author, Tom Ehrich, “For Jesus, life was about love not wealth, servanthood not power, sharing not hoarding, liberation not oppression, mercy not vengeance and goodness not evil.”

So passionate was Jesus about this that, according to Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book, The Last Week, “He attracted a following and took his movement to Jerusalem at the season of Passover. There he challenged the authorities with public acts and public debates. All this was his passion, what he was passionate about: God and the Kingdom of God, God and God’s passion for justice. Jesus’ passion got him killed.”

Was the entry into Jerusalem a protest march? **If fits the profile, which means it was also a funeral procession and Jesus knew it.** Speaking like a prophet on behalf of the disenfranchised would put his life in great peril. The authorities were already plotting to arrest him and silence his voice. Thus, in the words of Dr. Fred Craddock, “You could hear the groan of God each step along the way. He was not marching into a welcoming city but to his own grave.”

What are we to make of the way Matthew portrays Palm Sunday? I believe it is this. With Jesus, you get all three, a parade, a protest march and a funeral procession. In other words, you get celebration and joy, a social conscience and a heavy heart. If we are going to be the presence of Christ in a broken world, we must embrace all three.

We must be a people of joy whose hearts are filled with thanksgiving for all of God’s blessings. Life is a gift and it is good. Our lives need to reflect this and inspire others to count their blessings.

We must be mindful of those that are struggling and be their advocate. We need to use our talents, opportunities and influence to bring all people to the table where their voices will be heard and needs met.

Our hearts need to break, too, when we see the victims of those that have abused power. We need to be as committed as he was to healing wounds and creating a world where justice flows like a mighty stream.

Where do you fall short? Which of these three do you embrace? Which do you avoid? Which ones are missing in your life? What do you need to do to be more Christ-like? Think about it this week as you retrace Jesus’ steps into Jerusalem and ask for God’s help to be more like this courageous man on a divine mission.