

## **Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday), 2020**

**Matthew 21:1-11**

### **The Divine Hurricane**

This Sunday holds a long title: the Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday): the day of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem; and the day which signals the beginning of the end for Jesus. To understand this Sunday, we are invited to identify for ourselves the tension between the excitement of triumphant expectation, and the necessity of suffering and death; and this year, particularly, the tension between one's security in worldly powers and feeling in control, versus placing our lives in the hands of the One who calls us into sacrifice and faith in uncertain times.

Theologian Bishop NT Tom Wright calls this day the "perfect storm" – a clash of Roman political imperialism with the hopes and expectations of Israel.

We can capture the first element of this by picturing the processions of that particular day. You see, we understand that Jesus' "triumphal" entry would not have been the only procession into Jerusalem that day.

From the east side of the city, hailing from the peasant village of Nazareth, came Jesus, known as a healer and holy man, heard to be proclaiming himself as Son of God. Rather bizarre – on the colt of a donkey, accompanied and celebrated by his followers, most of whom were impoverished rural peasants, out-of-work fishermen, politically and economically marginalized and socially outcast.

And through the western gate, the custom on this day was that Pontius Pilate would enter, travelling at the head of an imperial cavalcade and a column of legions of soldiers: Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria.

One procession proclaimed the Kingdom of God on earth; the other, the unmatched, violent power of Empire, of a "civilized" socio-political order imposed by the sword on the disempowered peoples of the world with a thorough brutality.

The festival that brought these two diametrically opposed processions into Jerusalem was the Passover, the celebration of Israel's liberation from an earlier empire. It's no accident or coincidence that Jesus chose Passover, the great national Exodus-festival, to make his crucial move. The long story of Israel must finally confront the long story of Rome.<sup>1</sup>

All the Emperor's power was displayed in commanding array to make an impact, and show that it was by force that peace would be kept in this out-of-the-way city. Passover evoked memories for the oppressed Jews of previous freedom from captivity – too many memories for the Roman occupiers to be entirely comfortable about.

The spectacle that attended the Procurator's entrance into the city—foot soldiers and cavalry, armour and weapons, banners and emblems—would have been a sobering, intimidating demonstration of raw imperial power and would call to mind the theology of Caesar's Empire.

The previous Emperor, Augustus Octavian Caesar, had been officially declared as divine; as "son of god" or "son of the divine Julius." The word went round the world which Rome was quickly conquering: Good news! We have an emperor! The Son of God has become King of the world!

His successor, Tiberius, took the same titles.

This mighty Emperor was promoted to the masses as being the one to have ushered in a new era of world peace, albeit a peace through strength, peace achieved through violence, invasion and oppression.

In contrast to this, Jesus had been embodying the rescuing, redeeming love of Israel's God, and Israel's own capital city and leaders couldn't see it. To use a very commanding image (and again borrowing this from Tom Wright) "the divine hurricane sweeps in from the ocean, and to accomplish its purpose it must meet, head on, the cruel western wind of pagan empire and the

high-pressure system of national aspiration. Jesus seizes the moment, the Passover-moment, the Exodus-moment, not least because these, too, speak of the sovereign freedom and presence of God.” Thus: God comes to Israel riding on a donkey, in fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy of the coming peaceful kingdom, announcing judgment not just on Rome, but on the religious leaders and Israel itself.

The events of Holy Week unfold: the meeting of divine love with the might of empire and the overheated aspiration of Israel.

This year – holding faith in God-in-Christ near and dear to us, as we are subject to forces out of our control – the coronavirus might look a whole lot different than a mighty spectacular parade of Imperial dominance, but its impact and power is similar. We keep safe as best we can, in the face of an “hurricane” that may wreak havoc on the innocent.

Our own purposes and expectations for this time period of our lives are on hold as we navigate this storm. There are choppy and increasingly stormy waters to navigate – the financial, and (more than that) the social and emotional havoc which many may experience – depression, re-emergence of trauma, family violence, hopelessness, helplessness loss of home and livelihood, the rawness of “Who am I now, when everything has changed?”

During Holy Week, as we look on that ancient clash of the world’s powers (Rome) versus self-emptying faithfulness to God, we are called to open ourselves to God’s way. This may look well out of kilter with the way we may want to plan things, and certainly out of kilter with the ways of the world that put material success and “stuff” as high value goals. To truly follow Jesus isn’t going to mean protection from the hurricane. Going through this storm may necessarily mean the shattering – the putting to death - of any falsely placed aspirations and our plans (even our God focused ones), so that God may bring something new that is his own creation, not ours. That’s the ultimate way of discipleship. That is what it's like when we are caught up in Jesus's perfect storm.

My prayer (besides safety, peace, and God’s healing touches)– and I know this is the same for many of you – is that this storm will cause people to re-evaluate their lives, to discern what is good and true and reliable, and turn or return to Christ as their anchor.

And – to borrow again from Professor Wright- when we say with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, "We had hoped ... but now it's all gone wrong," let’s pray our ears are open to hear the fresh word - the word that comes when the storm is stilled, and in the new great calm we see a way forward we had never imagined.

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<sup>i</sup> NT Wright: *On Palm Sunday, Jesus Rides into the Perfect Storm*; ABC Religion and Ethics 11/4/14

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### **A short and challenging Reflection for Palm/Passion Sunday**

*The story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is one in which we can find ourselves. Where are you? Amongst (and staying with) his hopeful supporters, or drifting with the crowd that bays for his blood when he’s paraded by the authorities as a criminal and blasphemer? There is always the potential to be part of the crowd that cries “Crucify him” or amongst the disciples that fade away from his side–in our time, “crucifying him” and “denying him” can mean turning our backs on, or being silent about, issues that call for actions and words of mercy and justice demanded of every follower of his. Think about any time you are silent or inactive in the face of injustice, discrimination, labelling or dehumanising of others. Is it because you can’t discern the injustice, or because it will cost you to stand apart from, or oppose, the crowd? When you do stand up for Christ, whether by proclaiming your faith or by your following him in mercy and justice, you are showing and being Christ to the world.*