

A Nice – Ugly Procession

Mathew 21:1-3, 6-9



Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples,² saying to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me.³ If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them’, and he will send them at once.”

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

Do you know what a procession is? A procession is “a group of individuals moving along in an orderly often ceremonial way.” A procession has different purposes, mostly religious. Now, have you ever been in a procession?

I haven’t been in one per se, but I have seen them and a couple times maybe followed them s certain distance.

In Guatemala where we came from originally, during Lent and Holy Week many catholic churches will organize processions with a variety of themes. All of them display big floats which are carried on shoulders. Here is video to give you a glimpse of what is like to be in those processions. (Let’s watch)

These types of processions are considered mini-journeys to be in. And if a person lives in another community, then the journey just gets complicated. Because, and as you know, journeys can be nerve-wracking. There's all the packing to do. If we have children, they must be amused. Maps have to be consulted, lodging arrangements need to be made, and the bank account prepared. A journey is a major event.

Today we observe Palm Sunday which we can actually call a "Journey Sunday" even a “Processional Sunday.” The lessons we read and hear take us from place to place, beginning from a field near Bethany to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives, from there back to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem to Golgotha. Finally there's the journey from Calvary to the tomb. Each one of these journeys is a major event in itself. And each new path taken seems to draw us deeper into the darkness.

Death and burial beckon us, and the Service of Good Friday will only reinforce this reality. While procession offer nice and colourful pictures, if we dig deep in the real reason of the procession, then it really turns into an ugly one.

Perhaps that's why many of us avoid Holy Week. We like happy endings. Let's skip the pain and get on with the joy!

Holy week is about how Jesus and his disciples ended their long journey, ending it in Jerusalem. But along the way we see Jesus healing people and teaching them at length about the Kingdom that was to come. And people believed. They believed his words of grace and truth. They believed that the miracles he worked were from God above. They believed in him and hoped that he was the Messiah who had come from God to save them.

And when Jesus arrived at Jerusalem, he didn't disappoint the crowds. He acquired a donkey and rode into town just as the prophets had said the Messiah would. And the people responded in kind. They turned that little donkey ride into a great victory parade. They sang and chanted, "Hosanna" which is a shout of joy which means "Save us!" Other people heard the commotion and said "who is this?" Jesus' followers replied, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth."

That is how it should be! Jesus riding in humility, but at the same time being praised and blessed. We Christians know the joy and blessing of worshipping and glorifying Jesus. And we long to hear the crowds of our day shout "Save us" to Jesus. We want them to know the joy of worshipping Jesus.

One of the most neglected characters in the Palm Sunday story is the donkey. Donkeys are conservative folk. They like doing things the same old way. So "adventure" and "donkey" just don't go together. Yet the Palm Sunday story begins with a donkey in a field. It lives in the same field, treads the same path, and eats at the same hour-day-by-day, year-by-year. Then one day, strangers enter the field, put a halter around the donkey and pull it away. Most donkeys would resist. If this donkey had been given the gift of speech, like Balaam's donkey in the Old Testament story, it might have resisted. It is one thing to be called to do something within the context of the life we enjoy, and another to be moved be asked to do something out of our comfort zone. Then you have our journeys of faith which are something else altogether.

The donkey was taken to the place where Jesus was and clothes were put on its back. Had the donkey been able to speak it might have loudly objected that it was good enough as it was. It didn't need dressing up. Something like what we would say "I don't come to where Jesus is to be changed. I come for comfort. I come for recognition, for affirmation. To be told that I am all right."

Then, Jesus sat on the donkey. Perhaps It had never been ridden before. Leave that to horses. Carrying Jesus is for enthusiasts, religious fanatics, but surely not for us. We don't come each Sunday to be where Jesus is in order to carry him. What would our friends think? If we are asked whether we have given our lives to Jesus, we prefer subtle ways of denial.

Then the journey into Jerusalem began and the crowds cheered and gave Jesus on this donkey a nice reception using palms and chanting. The donkey might have mistaken the cheers to be in honour and praise of donkeys! After all being a Jesus-carrying donkey was an extraordinary achievement. "A unique donkey I am," this animal might have thought. If it had attempted to acknowledge the crowds, Jesus might have been tossed aside. Instead the donkey plodded on to the place where Jesus would do his great work of redemption.

All through Holy Week we find people drawn to Jesus, who then resist him, or try to change the story, avoid the consequences or denounce him. The crowds that had cheered him, later cried "Crucify!" Religious folk plotted his death. Most of the disciples ran away rather than face facing suffering and death. They just didn't like the way the story was working out. They feared reality. The Apostle Peter denied him. After all he was important, and what all he had important thing to do than pay much attention to the reality. He couldn't risk arrest. He was now in charge. In the end only Simon of Cyrene was prepared to be a faithful donkey and carry the cross, only the faithful and brave women and St. John, stood and watched the reality of a barbaric execution. Only Joseph of Arimathea was brave enough to offer a tomb. They were involved in the procession, in the real procession of life and faith. The others were spectators and stayed from afar.

Each of these journeys draws us into a world of darkness, of betrayal, of naked power, of cowardice and of death. Those of us who love a brave new world, like inevitable progress will in the end receive joy and peace; those who find that illness, separations, betrayal, the use of naked force, darkness and death are offensive things, may well be discomforted by this day and the days that now are before us this week.

Our faith is not an escape from reality. It draws us into the reality of this world as Jesus, who is one of us, and Jesus who is true God, confronts and submits to the worst human beings do in order to give us the grace to be the best human beings can be. Jesus dies. He really dies an agonizing and dreadful death. In that agony, Jesus dies to all the acts of betrayal, false ambition, power, authority, evil and corruption that lies within the human race and within each of us.

The prophets had foretold it hundreds of years before. Isaiah spoke of how God's servant must suffer. John the Baptist had called Jesus the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." How does a lamb take away sins? By being sacrificed of course! Even Jesus had warned his disciples that he must suffer and die.

For a few hours, when the procession is over, when the journey is completed, we will be left with a dead Jesus in a tomb. There's no Easter in the lessons today. Nor will there be all week.

But for us, unless we can walk these paths, leaving our comfort zone, our self-satisfaction, daring to walk beyond safety into the darkness of evil and death, carrying Jesus to the tomb, we will not even begin to grasp the power of the Resurrection.

I don't condone the reason why people carry those big floats in Guatemala, or anywhere those kinds of processions are done. They do so because they think that by carrying a float they get closer to God. But I admire their journey, their dedication and sacrifice. If only we would borrow the same aptitude and carry Jesus in the real life, here and now.

Yet on this day, we don't borrow that attitude we do get it from the one who died and rose for us, so don't be afraid to continue in your journey, because the same power that resurrected Jesus from the tomb will be with us, now and forever, and will help us to get through this week of darkness and gloom, as well as in our personal and individual lives. No matter how hard your procession of life is, and how ugly your journey has turned, at the end of that procession and journey, the Glory the resurrection of the Incarnated God, the Messiah and Christ, will shine over us, and fill us with grace, truth and hope.

In His name, amen.