

GOD'S WARRIOR

--Palm Sunday. It's not really as simple an occasion as it appears from everything that we've been taught, think we understand, and typically celebrate about the occasion.

You know the basic story, its earliest rendition, from Mark's gospel account, constituting our first reading this morning. In it, we hear that the streets that day are full of excited people, doing things that are quite out of the ordinary. It's not just for anybody that handy trees would be stripped of their branches, in order to strew them in front of his or her path--an outward sign of respect for, say, a visiting dignitary. Nor would people take off articles of their own precious clothing and throw them out onto the streets, in the hopes, mind you, that that same special someone would walk over them or step on them.

These, we are accustomed to thinking, suggest that the ride into Jerusalem on that day is a high point in Jesus' life and ministry. Why, we even call it the "triumphal entry." After all that traveling on those dusty roads and into all those dirty villages and noisy cities, it seems that Jesus' movement has finally found a firm foothold. After all the sermons preached, and miracles performed, and treacherous situations with this adversary or that well-handled, clearly Jesus has prevailed. This occasion feels like a confirmation of who Jesus is and, finally, a validation of what he has come to accomplish among humanity.

Who among us does not accept the premise that, for Jesus, Palm Sunday is a very good day?

--If that were the end of it, as is usually presumed, then, this having being said, we'd be done this morning. If that's the whole of it, there's no reason to belabor the point, is there? Why, we could move directly into our moments of reflection, sing the concluding hymn, pronounce the benediction, and go home . . . except, according to this same evangelist, these enthusiastic members of the crowd are also shouting things that are, frankly, a bit problematical.

They are said to be shouting strange-sounding words like *Ho-shi'-ah-na*, which gets put into English as "Hosanna!" Since we don't know any better, we take "Hosanna" to mean "Yippee!" or "Hooray!", just as was implied in our Call to Worship today. It is a Hebrew word of exclamation, alright. It is part of the Hallel portion of the Book of Psalms, which is sung at Passover and at the Feast of Tabernacles [cf. 118.25: "Save us, we beseech Thee, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech Thee, give us success!"]. However, it is properly to be translated as "Save us!" The word *Ho-shi'-ah-na* is one that would be addressed to a king, or to God on behalf of a king: Hosanna! Save us! Save us now!

That puts a twist on what we thought we knew about Palm Sunday.

You see, there is a disturbing quality to that exclamation, heard plainly in the other things that those in the crowd are also reported to be shouting--things like, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" and "Blessed be the kingdom of our father David that is coming!" These are words that are out-and-out messianic: The one who is coming in the name of the Lord is the Messiah; the kingdom that is coming is one ruled over by the Messiah, cast in the image of the great former King David.

In short, these are words on that day that, both by them who yell them and by anyone who hears them, carry political, even military, meanings. "Save us, Jesus!" they are chanting in their Hosannas. "Flex your power and be our certain deliverance finally at hand! Be our king, now coming into the capital city to claim your rightful possession of the throne!" Given the time when Jesus makes this celebrated ride into Jerusalem, they are just the sort of words that can get a man arrested, or killed.

On that Palm Sunday, you see, in proclaiming Jesus to be *me-schi'-ach*, the Messiah, the kingly Anointed One, they are identifying him as God's warrior, presently come at the end of days to do battle with the enemies of Israel--at the moment the Romans, who do not take kindly to that sort of seditious excitement.

In other words, Palm Sunday, for Jesus, is nowhere as simple as being a very good day. It is a very tricky day. Perhaps that's why, in any of the gospel accounts concerning this touted "triumphal entry," there is not a single mention of Jesus' smiling broadly to the giddy crowd, waving back with a thumbs-up confidence that affirms their expectations of him and revels in their adulation of him, as if he were some sort of conquering general.

--We fast-forward, then, from this scene in Mark's gospel to the second of our two readings this morning, this one from John's account, written some 30-40 years later. Here, already betrayed, captured, and taken into custody, Jesus stands before Pilate, who, on behalf of dominant Roman power, is asked to judge the accused.

Pilate at once poses the key question, drilling down on the problematical messianic possibilities to the man. History shows that Jesus would not be the first Jew, nor the last Jew, to be thrown into a Roman jail or executed on a Roman cross for promoting himself as the Messiah. So, Pilate immediately presses, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Mk 15.2a= Jn 18.33). Pilate is pointedly inquiring, "Do you think that you are the Messiah? Do you believe that you are God's warrior, a king come to challenge Caesar himself?" It is a pivotal moment if ever there was one.

Jesus' answer, reflecting John's own opinion on the question, challenges everything that we think we know about the Palm Sunday occasion. "My kingdom," says Jesus, "is not from this world" (John 18.36a). Translation: I am no threat at the literal, external, political level. That suggests a distinct distancing on the part of this evangelist from the former messianic take on Jesus--which may well be because those mistaken beliefs, a few short decades before, have brought unimaginable destruction and death to thousands in and around Jerusalem. "My kingdom," Jesus continues, "is not from here" (John 18.36c). Translation: The kingdom which is connected to me lies elsewhere. And where, I wonder, would that be?

--If you've gotten lost in all the details here, I do apologize. It's required that much to arrive at this point to say something that, without that background, might sound just plain wrong. If you haven't gotten lost yet, then you'll no doubt agree that it is quite the stretch between Mark's Jesus and John's Jesus.

Jesus, John submits, is King, but he is not the messianic warrior King that the people have expected, and that they are depicted as cheering about on those Jerusalem streets on that Palm Sunday occasion. John's Jesus is not concerned about overthrowing the Romans by marvelous military might. In fact, John's Jesus seems not concerned at all about external change, but he is passionately concerned about internal change. For John, the kingdom which Jesus represents is a thoroughly interior one--which is why the Fourth Evangelist is often said to be the "most spiritual" of the lot.

In clear contradistinction to what the misguided enthusiasts are carelessly yelling on the streets in Mark's version, John's Jesus is opening up people to a very different sort of kingdom, then, one which is to be sought out and to be discovered within themselves. Spiritually, symbolically, Jesus' ride into the capital city is the quiet, humble ride into the human heart itself.

It remains to be seen whether or not Jesus will prevail there, whether or not this day, or any day, will be a very good day indeed.

It seems, then, that, in bringing about the Kingdom, God doesn't need the warring. What God needs is simply the willing.

Are you among them? Are you one of the willing?

Or are you, like many along that Jerusalem route, still yelling about all the wrong things?