

April 17, 2011  
Palm Sunday

“Salvation Rides a Donkey”

John 12:12-19, Matthew 27:11-66

While often the beginning of the war is marked by doubt and uncertainty, a coming final victory is often pretty clear. World War II started out with a long period of Axis victories and the United States joined the war after getting shellacked at Pearl Harbor. Yet a few years later, at the cost of many lives, inevitable victory over Germany and Japan was seen on the horizon, and eventually arrived.

And even at the beginning of a war, even if victory is not certain, we always celebrate the warriors with pomp and pageantry. Typically we have parades and our warriors march in crisp uniforms carrying their weapons. Perhaps even artillery and armor are included in this celebratory show of might and power.

Jesus' parade and war is different. *“The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!’ And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, ‘Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!’ His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.’”*

Jesus does not ride a large warhorse decked out with armor and decoration; he rides a humble donkey, an animal that has never been ridden into battle. He does not bear any sword or shield. He does not look like a king or warrior at all; perhaps just a nondescript rabbi. He doesn't rally the people with energetic speeches about His power and might and glory. He doesn't urge people to join Him in the fight. I wonder if He even waved at the crowd or if He simply rode with His head hung low, as if riding to death. Jesus does not look like a warrior marching toward victory.

Yet the crowd makes this a parade, a rallying for battle! They cry out “Hosanna!” Despite the lack of an army and the pageantry of a military rally, the crowd knows Jesus has done signs and wonders; that He is the Messiah, the Christ who comes to save Israel. They see Jesus and they expect the long-promised recompense and blessing of God to be realized for them. They expect a war. They expect a victory and they embrace their champion...well not everybody.

As we switch from the Palm Sunday picture to today's Passion Sunday Gospel reading the enemies of Jesus have turned the tables. Jesus is under arrest. Jesus has been beat up. The crowd has been turned. Pilate gives in. Jesus is mocked, stripped, scourged and beaten some more. He is led out to Golgotha and crucified. The battle has been joined.

Jesus still doesn't look like a warrior. He looks pitiful. He looks beyond weak and helpless. He is a horror. The battle has been engaged and to everybody standing around that hill outside Jerusalem, the coming of the final victory is pretty clear, and the victor is not Jesus of Nazareth. He cries out with a loud voice and then, that's it. He breathes His last.

Then earthquakes, splitting rocks, tearing curtain, opening tombs and a clear realization of who is hanging on the cross. “Truly, this was the Son of God!” But it's past tense...“was.” It is a statement of Jesus' defeat. And can you even call it a defeat? Jesus didn't fight; didn't even raise His voice against the enemy! Was that a war, a battle? Or was it just a massacre?

We'll save the rest for next Sunday. We know this was a war, and one in which the outcome was never in doubt. But it never quite looked that way, did it? Going in, Jesus doesn't look like a fighter. We get a glimpse of His glory in the transfiguration and we get a peek at His power in His miracles, but the fact is that in the way He lives and works the world never sees a great victory on the horizon. Yet we know that in the end Jesus is victorious over His enemies and ours; sin, the devil, death itself. Keeping this in mind, turn your eyes from Jerusalem 2000 years ago to your world today.

Quite frankly, it doesn't look like Jesus is winning. Around the world in so many places it seems like pagan beliefs or outright faithlessness are ruling the day. In some places it seems the Christian church is on the run. In our own country, which at one time was considered a Christian nation, we see the visible church in decline and in some respects under attack. Even within some churches the clear teaching of the Bible is being questioned and even jettisoned altogether.

And then, if we dare, we turn our eyes inward to our own selves. We take the measure of the Ten Commandments and then the measure of loving God above all things and our neighbors as ourselves; does it look like Jesus is winning? Can we say of our Christian walk, "I definitely see a victory on the horizon"?

Do not panic. Do not despair.

Jesus was always headed for victory, and remember that on Palm Sunday He headed toward victory on a donkey, not on a warhorse. Jesus was always headed for victory and He did it through humble service and suffering. Jesus was always headed for victory and He did it in a way that looked stupid to the world, in a way that looked like defeat.

His victory comes to us the same way. It doesn't come by us gloriously standing in front of the church announcing, "I have defeated the law by keeping the commandments. I am victorious over sin!" It comes to us in humbly begging, "I repent of my many sins. I'm sorry. Please God, forgive me!"

It doesn't come to us by lighting and bright beams of light striking us and making us shine with a blinding holiness that strikes fear into unbelievers. It comes to us in the water and the Word in baptism. It comes to us in the body and blood of Christ that looks to the world to be nothing but bread and wine. In these our sin are forgiven, Satan is routed and death is made nothing more than a passing into Jesus' triumphant kingdom.

The victory of Christ's church doesn't come by legions of angels storming the world and smashing the temples and idols of false gods. It comes through those who believe repenting of their sins, serving others as best they can in love and forgiveness, and spreading the Word of Jesus' victory when the Holy Spirit puts opportunities before us. It doesn't look powerful, but it is the work of God ongoing until He says it has come to completion.

When you look at your world, your family, yourself, and what you see does not in any way look like a present victory or even one on the horizon; when it looks like your walk of faith is a losing battle headed for defeat, remember that this is how it looked for Jesus but His victory was never in question, and in Jesus Christ, neither is yours. And remember that His victory is not on the horizon, it is written in history and is a done deal. And it is a victory that is freely given to you daily in humble ways that the world may see as plain and even stupid, but that our victorious and everlasting king of creation declares are forgiveness and eternal, triumphant life. The Lord of Life has done it, and now matter how it may look, as Isaiah declares, none may defeat our God's victory for us.

*"He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty?"*

Amen.