Palm Sunday

There is so much going on underneath this familiar story and we’ve heard it so many times, I think it’s easy to miss the impact. As much as we might want to say you shouldn’t mix religion and politics, this story simply won’t let us.

I’ve often preached this scene as a sort of parody of the arrival of a king. This ragtag group with its leader on a donkey stands in stark contrast to a powerful Roman royal procession, so in some ways it is a parody of that.

But the fact is, it is clearly identifiable as a typical Jewish royal procession – this is how Israel’s kings might typically have entered a city.

That’s why the Pharisees urged Jesus to get his followers to be quiet – because they know exactly what this is. They completely get the optics of it – and they’re frightened.

Jesus is riding into a political powder keg, and this procession could be just the spark that sets it off. Jesus hears their warning…but he knows it’s too late.

At this point, the last part of Jesus’ mission has been completely put into motion and there’s no stopping it now. If he tries to silence the people, the very stones would cry out.

Our Old Testament reading is a prophecy from Zechariah. Jesus enacted Zechariah’s prophecy in his entrance to Jerusalem. It was a religious act. Jesus is claiming he is the king sent from God that Zechariah promised.

But it’s also political, because claiming to be a king when there already is a king on the throne – an emperor – is undeniably political.

The people with Jesus have come to believe Jesus is the one. Not all the ordinary Jewish people were sure about Jesus – but they have been waiting a long time for this king that Zechariah promised.

The anticipation and excitement have been building. Could he be the one who will bring down Rome and free them from oppression?

Shadowy Zealots are in the city. They’re waiting for this king to get the revolution going – and they’re trained to fight and ready to join in.

Roman soldiers are also in the city. They would have ridden into Jerusalem with Pontius Pilate. Their procession would have made Jesus’ procession look silly. They would have rolled into the city with a great display of power…warhorses…armor…swords and shields.

They rode into this city where the Spirit of Passover liberation hovered. The soldiers were there precisely to prevent what Jesus seems to be doing.

Jerusalem is a powder keg.

As he approaches, Jesus weeps over the city. He sees that in the end, the powder keg will explode. Jesus will go to his death in a display of non-violent resistance to evil. But the people will mostly miss the meaning of the cross.

The powder keg will eventually explode, and Jerusalem will be destroyed. In fact, by the time Luke wrote this, it already had been.

The procession moves on into the city and to the Temple. There Luke tells us, Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things, **46**and he said, “It is written,

‘My house shall be a house of prayer,’  
    but you have made it a den of thieves.”

The Temple had become corrupt. Instead of being a place to encounter God, the Temple priests and elders had sold their soul to the Roman Empire. They were more interested in saving their own positions of prestige and power within the Roman hierarchy, and they see Jesus as a threat to that.

For this story to have any impact for us, we need to be able to find our place in it. The word crowd or people shows up several times in the passion story.

That’s probably where most of us would have landed – in the crowd. Luke leaves it a little vague as to who these crowds are.

As Jesus and his procession enter, there is clearly a joyful crowd of followers with him, shouting Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Then there are people spreading cloaks along the road – Luke doesn’t make it completely clear whether they’re the followers that came with Jesus, or people from the city who have come out to welcome him.

Later on a crowd will show up with Judas to arrest Jesus. Are some of these the same people who welcomed him? Or even came with him?

Are the crowds who shouted crucify him before Pilate some of the same ones? Have they been turned against him?

We’re never told. That ambiguity leaves it open for us to imagine ourselves in the crowds. If we followed him joyfully into Jerusalem, would we stand with him when it was clear the tide was turning?

If we joyfully welcomed him, would fear of the power of Rome have persuaded us to abandon him? We already know that his inner circle – the 12 – abandoned, denied, and betrayed him. Would we do any better?

What might this whole scenario look like today?

I think the answer lies in the same thing it did then. It comes down to the question, which kingdom are we for?

Rome and its powerful religious backers offered a kingdom of security and wealth. This is during the period of the Pax Romana – the Roman peace. Rome has a powerful military who has helped expand the territory of the Empire. That military maintains the peace by tight control over its citizens through brutal suppression of resistance or any hint of rebellion.

Rome’s building projects are legendary including highways, aqueducts, Caesar’s palace, Herod’s palace and his addition to the Temple. The cost is high, especially for the vast majority of ordinary people crushed under taxes and forced labor.

For the wealthy and powerful, it works pretty well.

But the further down you go the less well it works. Fear is one of the major tools of the Empire to keep the masses at bay.

Caesar’s empire is one where some people are viewed as better than others and cruelty is all too common.

Then, there’s the kingdom Jesus offers. It’s a reign where the lowest are lifted up and the mighty brought down a peg. It’s a realm where people are physically and spiritually fed. Where the poor have what they need.

It’s a realm where love is the ruling principle – love of God…love of neighbor. Even love of enemies. It’s a reign where the sick are healed and the captives set free.

It’s a pretty beautiful world.

It might be the world we all would say we want. But are we truly ready to follow Jesus into the buzzsaw of Empire? Are we ready to follow him to the cross?

Over the centuries, Empires have risen and declined. In more recent history, modern nations have replaced empires. Many have not been much different than the old Empires. Power, wealth and security draw people in. Some people are viewed as better than others, and cruelty creeps in.

Over those centuries, powerful religious groups, like the Jewish Temple authorities and later the Roman Christian church under Constantine, hitched their wagon to Empire – to power.

But always, throughout history, there has persisted a ragtag bunch of Christians who do choose the kingdom of God…who choose love and peace and justice over wealth and power. Christians who have been truly willing to take up their cross and follow where Jesus led.

The gospel – the good news is that ultimately, Jesus and the Kingdom of God win. That’s good news for everyone. But right here, on the cusp of this holiest of weeks, we’re called to make a choice – which kingdom will we choose?