

Jerusalem was not just any city. By the first century, it had been the center of the sacred geography of the Jewish people for nearly a thousand years.

And on this spring day as Passover begins, the most sacred week of the Jewish year, two processions enter the city.

We are very familiar with one of them, the procession of this Jewish rabbi from Nazareth as we heard in the story from the gospel of Matthew; but it is also told in the gospels of Mark, Luke, and John.

From the east, he rides a donkey down the Mount of Olives into the city.

The other procession might not be as familiar to us. From the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, enters Jerusalem at the head of Roman cavalry sitting tall on their horses, soldiers with their swords and shields, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, the beating of drums.

He is a commanding presence in his chariot.

If Jerusalem is sacred geography for the Jews, then Pontius Pilate personifies the tyrannical geography of Caesar and the Roman Empire.

The crowds on the east spread their cloaks on the road, cut palm branches and spread them on the road, making the way smooth, as the prophet Isaiah would have said, for this donkey-riding rabbi.

The meaning of this procession is very clear, the words of the prophet Zechariah have come to life, as the Contemporary English Version puts it: *Everyone in Jerusalem, celebrate and shout! Your king...is coming to you. He is humble and rides on a donkey!*”

And the crowds in front, those behind, all around him, were shouting, “*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*”

In this ‘shout-out’ from the crowds, we are presented with the contrast between Jesus and Caesar, the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world.

You see, Pilate normally lived in his palace at Caesarea, and only came to Jerusalem whenever Jewish religious festivals drew large and potentially dangerous crowds to the city.

He had come to Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover week to make sure that no insurrection, uprising, no rebellion took place.

After all, Passover week was when the Jewish people remembered their deliverance by God from slavery under the Egyptian empire.

The Romans did not want to become the new Egyptians, so Pilate came to Jerusalem with the military might of Rome in full view.

Competing parades that day. Pilate was in town to make sure no one challenged the kingdom of Caesar. And here came Jesus, the common people shouting hosannas to a donkey-riding king.

I can imagine some of the conversations that night.

Pilate is in his Jerusalem headquarters receiving the daily report from the commander of the centurions.

“Well,” says Pilate, “Any surprises? How about those Passover pilgrims pouring into town? Have you enough men on duty to cover any local demonstrations? I heard there was quite a commotion over by the west-side gate where the Galileans come in.”

“No surprises,” says the commander, “That was just some religious guy, a fellow name Jesus. One of those so-called prophets with a gift of gab...right wing, left wing, I don’t know, just for the birds if you ask me.

One of my men did report there were some outbursts, some political slogans having to do with ‘King of the Jews’. You know how those religious fanatics can get used by those Zealot terrorists. We’ve had a lot of them start some trouble, but we’ll stay on top of it.”

“I know you will,” says Pilate. “Get in touch with some of our Jewish informers and find out what they know about this Jesus. These religious hucksters can be a pain in the neck. Dismissed.”

And listen in on a couple of ladies in the market.

“I tell you,” says one, “that man Jesus is just another ‘crazy’, a religious tramp if you ask me.

I’m surprised you fell for his scam. They say he doesn’t have a home of his own and he sponges on his rich friends, even his family calls him crazy.

Look at how he gets the crowds all worked up with that wild talk promising them peace on earth and pie in the sky by and by. And have you heard those stories about the women who hang around him...I’ve heard, well women of vey unseemly reputations!”

The other breaks in.

“I’m surprised you fall for all that gossip,” she says. “I believe the man’s got something. He doesn’t ask for money for himself, he helps feed people, and he heals people, all kinds of people.

I’m sick of organized religion myself, just boring and more boring, and all they want is my money; and those pompous priests with their fancy robes and dreary sermons. No wonder they’re jealous of Jesus.”

“Nonsense,” says the other lady. “Give me that old-time religion. These new guys come along all the time, and five years from now you’ll have forgotten all about Jesus for whoever the newest flavor of faith is. He’ll be withered and dead just like those palms you were waving today.”

And now in a dining room deep in the Temple.

Caiaphas, the High Priest of the Jewish people, has invited a very select group to dinner. Warmed with good food and wine, he turns to his distinguished guests, the leading members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body for faith and life.

“I don’t want any surprises,” he says. “The trouble with someone like Jesus is not that he teaches false doctrine, let the Pharisees worry about that and raise a ruckus. The real issue is the potential for rousing the political passion of the people against the Romans.

We’ve got a nice life here. The Temple services go on without any interference from the Romans, and we don’t want to rock the boat and get them upset with us.

That’s what worries me. Jesus might just be getting the crowds...I mean, I was told they were all yelling about ‘Son of David, King of the Jews’!

I tell you, Jesus could make it more than uncomfortable for us if the Romans thought we were urging the people to take our faith outside these walls, to go public with God. I think we need to think about a way to get rid of him. Who’s with me?”

Those parades are still competing in our lives, parades riding through the geography of our souls: Which parade shapes our conversation. Which king do we belong to?

Yes, we celebrate with those who happily threw their cloaks on the ground and waved their palm fronds and cried ‘Hosannas’ to Jesus.

But we know all too well how the jubilation fades and ‘Hosannas’ are replaced by ‘Crucify him’; how we swing from praise to denial, from commitment to abandonment.

Because we know we are not always so steady in how we live our faith outside these walls, how public we are with God, not always so sure in just who Jesus is, not always so solid in our loves and loyalties.

Jesus or Caesar? Whose kingship governs our lives?

Do we belong to the donkey-riding king who rides into our world to go head-to-head with parading power of evil that masquerades as honesty and righteousness, that bends the truth for its purposes, the war-drum-beating evil which undermines peace and creates terror, pain, misery, and death?

Do we belong to the donkey-riding servant king who helps us see through the impossible darkness, his unquenchable light that helps us see through sorrow, pain, and failure?

Do we belong to the donkey-riding son of God who was born as one of us and rides into our homes, our work, our politics, our businesses to overcome our selfishness, to purge our greed, to zap our prejudices and discrimination; to look us in the eye with love and compassion for the real, deep needs of all people?

Perhaps this explains Paul’s urgency when he wrote the Christians in Philippi saying, *“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*

Following Jesus Christ is a choice about how to live.

Jesus calls us to take up the donkey-riding life rather than ride in the chariots of power and pride; to empty ourselves of our arrogant notions of self-importance, self-sufficiency, and self-righteousness.

Jesus calls us to be humble servants of love and peace and justice in the face of hate and lies and confusion and oppression.

Following this donkey-riding king is a choice about what we believe truly makes for peace, truth, justice, and community.

Following him is a choice away from the greedy race to look bigger, better, and stronger than our neighbors.

Following Jesus is a choice to love people because God loves them rather than what they can do for us.

And let us never forget that following this donkey-riding king is a choice to sacrifice, of self-denial, rather than stand on our privileges while others suffer.

Are you ready to follow this donkey-riding king by the way you live public with God, by the way you love the whole creation and all God’s children...are you ready to follow this donkey-riding king from here to eternity?

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.