

A Sermon for Palm Sunday, 2020, at St. Andrew's Church, Kent

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In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For many years, my extended family shared in a beach house at Hampton Beach, New Hampshire. If you know Hampton, this was not down at the beach center, but at the North Beach, the one with the long seawall—a beach that is more or less a family beach. Except for one small hotel in the middle, a place that was grandfathered in many decades ago, there are no hotels along the main swath of the beach. All the property is reserved for fairly modest (and a few not-so-modest) family beach houses.

Our house, however, was next to that one small hotel—I think it had about five rooms to let. Its proprietors, the Kellys, were generally good people, and they kept an eye on our house during the winter, but they had one tradition that seemed out of keeping with their normally sensible and fairly staid nature. Every year, their grown children would have a party in the small hotel parking lot for their friends on the Fourth of July. Playing music and talking in increasingly loud frequencies over the course of the day, they imbibed a variety of beverages—not all of them lemonade—and each year there was an event that culminated the party: their annual parade. As a group of perhaps twenty or thirty persons, they would suddenly step into Rt. 1A, the coastal road, and, with air horns sounding and flags

waving and children shouting and dogs barking and what not else happening, they would march one block south on 1A, then one block over to the back road, Kings Highway, then one block north on Kings Highway, and then back to the small parking lot of the hotel. It was not anything like the Boston Pops and the 1812 overture. It was not anything like our solemn Memorial Day parade here in Kent. Joyful, yes, and patriotic, perhaps, but most of all, it was a motley sight.

I think of the Kellys and their parade every year on Palm Sunday when we read about Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. That, too, was not an ordinary parade, and I suspect there was something rather motley about it. The good people of Jerusalem had undoubtedly seen parades before—great spectacles, processions of power and might by the Romans, parades that underscored the strength of the Roman conquerors and their armies, parades that were meant to intimidate and inspire, parades with horses and trumpets and chariots and gladiators clad in armor.

This was not such a parade. There was Jesus, riding on a donkey—or was it a colt? The Gospel of Matthew is unclear on that detail. Somehow he seems to be riding on both. Matthew tells us this was to fulfill the scriptural prophecy, “Your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” And the crowd—or was it a mob?—throwing palm branches in his path, something indeed they would do for a king; and shouting Hosanna to him,

indicating that they saw him somehow as their savior. But a savior from what? Perhaps they had heard about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and some of them wanted him to do similarly powerful miracles for them. Perhaps they longed for a new king and political savior of Israel, someone who could throw out the Romans. Their expectations are unclear, but I cannot help but think that they saw Jesus as something **other than** the embodiment of the love of God—a way of suffering and sacrifice. I cannot help but think that they saw Jesus as someone who would solve all their problems. I cannot help but think that, even with the motley nature of this parade, they were yearning for Jesus to be a god of power and might—but with a more earthly understanding of the nature of that power than what came to pass on Good Friday.

In my English class, I often have my students read a sonnet by Percy Bysshe Shelley that says something about that sort of temporal power. It's called "Ozymandias". Perhaps you have heard it:

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

That king of kings, Ozymandias, was clearly a very different person from the one carried into Jerusalem on a donkey, or perhaps a colt. That king’s visage bore a sneer, a frown, and a wrinkled lip, and his statue challenged anyone, even the mighty to look on his works—perhaps his greatest fortress or mightiest castle or most glorious city—and despair. He was a great king of power and might, at least of an earthly sort of power and might.

Our Epistle today from Philippians says something very different about our King of Kings. It speaks of “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.” On this day, on Palm Sunday, we begin to see the true nature of Jesus’s kingship. In this motley parade through the streets of Jerusalem, it is one that challenges all attempts to find ultimate meaning in temporal power. It is one built on self-emptying humility. It is one that points inexorably to the cross on Good Friday, and the self-giving love of God in Christ for each one us, no matter how much we are like the members of that mob who one moment were proclaiming their Hosannas but soon thereafter were screaming for blood.

According to literary scholars, there really was an Ozymandias, that king of kings who thought his earthy grandeur would last forever. No one remembers him now, except in this poem read in English classes around the country. He has been forgotten in the sands of time. Our King of Kings, however—the one who rode on the back of a donkey, the one who embodied the sacrificial love of God which we are all called to follow—lives on in the billions of people around the world who proclaim him Lord of Lords. As we now begin Holy Week, I invite you to join in his motley parade, not as a member of the fickle mob, but, by his grace, as one of his disciples ready to take up the cross and follow him.

I must acknowledge that these are challenging times for all of us. It might seem hard or even impossible to find ways to follow our Lord on his way to the cross while confined to our homes, and so I also invite you to consider how you might embrace that path during this Holy Week. Can you spend some extra time in prayer this week—especially for those who have no one praying for them? Can you call to check in on a friend or, perhaps especially, someone who might truly be alone? Can you reach out in selfless love in some small way to help a person in need? Can you ask yourself in all humility where in your life you think like Ozymandias, and where you act like Jesus? These can all be humble acts done on behalf of a humble king riding on a donkey, but on this day, we know that such humble deeds point the way to the Kingdom of God. Amen.