



PALM SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

Unlike the other gospel narratives, John intentionally emphasizes the use of palm branches by the large crowds to celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. John's attention to trees with palm branches was a way to chart the conflict between Jesus and Roman/Jewish authorities. The waving of palm branches was a recognized practice to indicate political triumph and victory (such as when the Maccabees conquered the Jerusalem territory). Palm branches represented political power rooted in conquest, domination and war. In fact, the crowd's decision to wave palm branches while doing Hosanna chants reveals their desire for a political war-hero. Their cultural upbringing informs their understanding of "savior" and "king" and is associated with national triumph and the overthrow of enemies occupying Jewish territories.

The emperor's grand procession symbolizes a warrior that has saved the world through force and might. Scholars Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan state that the Roman procession ritual dramatizes the emperor/king's entourage as a "*visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles...*"¹ The emperor's procession represents a mixture of political and theological ideologies designed to promote an imperialist agenda and to elevate the emperor's stature to that of a divine-like savior of the people.

Jesus, however, stages a theatrical event in Jerusalem to produce a new ethical reality that counters those of the Roman officials and religious aristocracy. Jesus adopts imperial and militaristic language and ritual, but transforms the meaning to launch an ethical program receptive to Palestinian-Jewish peasantry. Countering both Roman imperialism and Jewish nationalism, Jesus chooses to ride a small donkey, greatly contrasting with the powerful warhorse of the emperor or military leader. The donkey may symbolize Jesus' radical love ethic and servitude in contrast to the political violence and cultural elitism of the prevailing powers in Palestine.

II. Why I Am Opposed to the Vietnam War



Jesus' anti-imperialist entry into Jerusalem resonates in Dr. Martin King's opposition to the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, contemporary mass culture drowns this critical aspect of King's work in superficial coverage of his "pacifism" and non-violence such as the "I Have a Dream" speech. King's critical opposition to Vietnam beyond his pacifism and non-violence lies in his understanding of the connection between war and the arrangements of power-domination. Dr. King asserted,

And I knew that America would not invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like a demonic, destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.²

King faced constant ridicule and criticism from within and outside the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization that ironically emerged from questioning King's version of leadership. Many felt that King was stepping outside his proper boundaries by delving into international politics, viewed as removed from the matters of civic and racial rights. Yet, he saw the opposition against the war as part of his spiritual and ethical commitments to his calling from Jesus. King comments,

...many persons questioned me about the wisdom of my path.

At the heart of their concern, this query often loomed large and loud:
Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King? Why are you joining
The voices of dissent? Peace and civil rights don't mix, they say...
They seem to forget that before I was a civil rights leader, I answered a call
Which left the spirit of the Lord upon me and anointed me to preach the
Gospel. And during the early days of my ministry, I read the Apostle Paul

Saying, “Be ye not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of minds....”³

While war may sometimes be necessary, our fight for peace (following in the footsteps of our peaceful Savior who rode into Jerusalem on a colt) must indicate that we refuse to accept that it is ever the best course of action.

III. The Great Recession of 2009



Jesus’ anti-triumphal entry also flies in the face of American free-market capitalism, militarism and corporate domination in this particular moment. Similar to Rome, many have argued how America maintains its infrastructure through exploitation, greed and violence. The arrangements of power have caused a “recession” as ordinary citizens struggle for employment, housing, health care, etc. Corporations who are deemed “too big to fail” have an inordinate influence on politics and law, giving no accountability for perpetuating the long nightmare, where the unemployed, working and middle classes can barely survive the many hiccups of life.

Unfortunately, corporate dominance and Wall Street interests arrest and suffocate the development of democracy and deny its citizens access to life. Would Jesus triumphantly enter Wall Street or the “back streets” of our nation? Would he proclaim his kingship from inside a Bentley, Rolls Royce or Learjet like contemporary captains of industry? Would he be flanked by secret service details like political heads of state signifying the height of political power and privilege? Or would Jesus’ anti-triumphal entry, like in Jerusalem, disrupt our current obsessions with perceived power by way of luxury that has pervaded our society, in general, and even a large segment of our churches, in particular. Every now and then it is good to remember the powerful and poetic words of James Weldon Johnson: “[L]est our hearts, drunk from the wine of the world we forget Thee!”

IV. Songs That Give Lessons from Palm Sunday

The songs for Palm Sunday should mirror Jesus' radical love ethic, which gave him creative space to counter financial privilege of the elite and military might of the politically powerful. The songs should express our solidarity with Jesus' ethical agenda of justice, service and love to enable us as Christians to live in the world and witness to the greatest reality. To be sure, we do not celebrate a military warlord, but a risen Savior. Thus, our celebration of Palm Sunday should seek to create a worship encounter (and, thus, world) that challenges measuring human worth by economic wealth and political force. This, in the last instance, only proves to devalue our humanity in the eyes of the one who mounted a donkey.

Hosanna, Hosanna was the proper chant to recognize the King's entrance yet the meaning changes with Jesus regarding his anti-militarism.

Hosanna

Hosanna

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord

Hosanna Hosanna

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.⁴

"All Hail, King Jesus," is a song that again uses the triumphal and militaristic language (King) yet produces a different affect and meaning because of Emmanuel.

All Hail, King Jesus

All hail, King Jesus, All hail, Emmanuel

King of kings, Lord of lords, Bright Morning Star.

And throughout eternity

I'm going to praise him, and forevermore

I will reign with him.⁵

"Lift Him Up," expresses the importance of discipleship/or responsibility.

Lift Him Up

1.How to reach the masses men of every birth

For an answer Jesus gave the key:

"And I, if I be lifted up from the earth,

Will draw all men unto me."

Lift him up, Lift him up,

Lift the precious Savior up,

Still he speaks from eternity: "And I, if I be lifted

Up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."

2.Oh! The world is hungry for the Living Bread,

Lift the Savior up for them to see; Trust him,

And do not doubt the words that he said,

I'll draw all men unto me.
(Chorus)

3. Don't exalt the preacher, don't exalt the pew,
Preach the Gospel simple, full a free; prove him
And you will find that his promise is true,
I'll draw all men unto me
(Chorus)

4. Lift him up by living, as a Christian ought,
Let the world in you the Savior see; Then men
Will gladly follow him who once taught,
I'll draw all men unto me.
(Chorus)⁶

V. Conclusion

At the beginning of today's worship service, every individual should receive palm crosses that can be pinned on. These palm cross pins highlight Jesus subverting aristocracy and militarism. Statements should be attached to each palm cross pin that allow members to celebrate and recommit their lives to Jesus' ethical program of love, service and justice, while also questioning behaviors/systems that foster hate and death. If palm cross pins are not available, use your bulletin/order of worship, screens and all resources available. Remember, our acts do not have to be a grand political resurgence, but must be reflected in our everyday lived experiences in our homes, schools, workplaces, and certainly in the church.

Notes

1. Borg, Marcus, and Dominic Crossan. The Last Week: The Day by Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006. p. 113.
2. King, Martin Luther, and Clayborne Carson. The Autobiography of Martin Luther King. New York: Intellectual Properties Management in association with Warner Books, 1998. p. 337.
3. Ibid.
4. "Hosanna." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #224
5. "All Hail King Jesus." African American Heritage Hymnal. #227
6. "Lift Him Up." African American Heritage Hymnal. #547