Surely This Madness Must Cease

Palm Sunday

April 9, 2017

[Matthew 21:1-11](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/HolyWk/APalmSun_RCL.html#gsp1) [Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/HolyWk/APalmSun_RCL.html#ps1)

[Isaiah 50:4-9a](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/HolyWk/APalmSun_RCL.html#ot2) [Psalm 31:9-16](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/HolyWk/APalmSun_RCL.html#ps2)

[Philippians 2:5-11](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/HolyWk/APalmSun_RCL.html#nt2) [Matthew 27:11-54](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/HolyWk/APalmSun_RCL.html#gsp3)

At the beginning of our service today, we hear from Matthew:

When Jesus and his disciples had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. . . .” The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed 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!"

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree on the basics of what happened on the day Jesus came into Jerusalem. There’s no doubt in my mind that this is what Jesus did. He was drawing on the prophet Zechariah, who spoke of the coming of a messiah, one who would deliver Israel.

The people of Jesus’ day understood full well the symbolism of what he was doing. Listen again to Zechariah:

Look! Your king comes to you;
    triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
    on a colt, the foal of a donkey.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*The Jewish Study Bible* informs us that Zechariah’s “image of the ideal king (Messiah) has been very influential in Jewish tradition, and has influenced the depiction of Jesus in the Gospels.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

But note prophet Zechariah’s own discordance: Our king comes to us
“triumphant and victorious.” But this king is also “humble and riding on a donkey.”

Kings don’t ride donkeys. They ride horses. A military messiah would be riding a horse, a war horse, with his sword drawn to the adulation and hosannas of those watching.

A donkey would carry not the conquering king and messiah but his equipment.

So what’s going on?

I think a social-science perspective can help us set the scene.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Matthew, Mark, and Luke agree that people are spreading clothing and palm branches on the road in front of Jesus so that the donkey won’t even touch the stones that ordinary folks walk on. They see Jesus, then, as someone extraordinary: a king, a general, a messiah. But such figures, unlike Jesus, are distant and out of reach; they are vastly “superior to ordinary human affairs and conditions.”

But Jesus is exactly the opposite. He says that he has come precisely for those who are inferior: the poor, the marginalized, the outcast. In terms we can understand, Jesus’ people are the homeless, the hungry, the poorly-educated, the trafficked, migrants and immigrants, and those in danger of losing their health care.

“To appreciate the scenario here,” the social-scientists tell us, we have to see—we have to see and understand—that “Jesus rides a non-war animal into the city that marks the center of the house of Israel.”

The grinding of gears, the cacophony here, is that the people are hailing Jesus as Son of David, great king and warrior.

In reality, though, Jesus is a penniless peasant from Galilee, the back of beyond: no sword, no fiery military steed, no army at his command.

No, I take that back; he does have an “army”: a group of outcasts, themselves poor, who see that Jesus is a prophet and speaks God’s truth about love, compassion, and justice.

Love, compassion, and justice.

Contrast Jesus and his message with who we are right now.

The new Administration’s budget proposal makes huge cuts in the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Justice, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, among many others. But it increases military spending by 10%: $50 billion dollars.

Let that sink in. The Administration proposes that we spend $574 billion dollars on the military.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Five hundred seventy-four *billion*.

I call this the immorality of numbers.

And such immorality makes us morally numb.

These last few days we’ve been horrified by the Sarin gas attack ordered by Syria’s brutal dictator. The gas attack killed at least 100 people, many of them children.[[5]](#footnote-5)

But where is our outrage about and condemnation of the U.S. airstrike in March on Mosul in Iraq that killed at least 200 people and maybe 300?[[6]](#footnote-6)

Won’t we ever learn?

As the Christian social justice community Sojourners so rightly says:

We cannot bomb our way to peace. When the airstrikes stop and all the bodies are finally pulled from the rubble, Mosul will be left with destruction, not harmony.

In this conflict, we can’t even bomb our way to victory, because each airstrike that takes innocent human life or blasts a hole in someone’s home in Iraq or in Syria simply plants the seeds of future extremism.

We cannot bomb our way to peace. We cannot claim victory in a war if we start another one — and another one, and another. . . . We cannot help people regain their humanity by disregarding it ourselves.

The road to peace is paved with sacrificial love. It requires valuing the lives of those in Mosul as much as we value our own . . . and then acting like it. That is why we go to the hard places. It’s not just about providing food or water or medical care. It’s about seeing people — their full humanity, their full worth. [[7]](#footnote-7)

So, you see, there are profound connections between Jesus’ choice of a non-military donkey, his entry into Jerusalem as peasant and prophet, and our madness of wealth and power and arrogance and militarism. Jesus spoke on behalf of the marginalized; with our ghastly spending we marginalize them ever further.

We are now, as a matter of policy, turning our benign neglect of the poor into malign neglect.

May God have mercy on our souls.

In some ways Jesus was an anti-messiah; he was not the deliverer that most wanted. In many ways we are anti-Christ. Bloating our military budget ever further while more and more of us go hungry and homeless and medically ill-cared for opposes Jesus’—and God’s—very being.

Let me close with this prayer that Martin Luther King spoke fifty years ago this month when he preached against the war in Vietnam. His words should resonate not only in our ears and throughout our minds and spirits, they should sound in our very marrow and bones.

Someday, dear God, may they become part of our very DNA.

Surely this madness must cease. We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor in America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and dealt death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as one who loves America, to the leaders of our own nation: The great initiative in this war is ours; the initiative to stop it must be ours.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Amen.

1. Zechariah 9:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Jewish Study Bible: Tanakh Translation*, 1259, note to verse 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Much of the following is drawn from Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, second edition, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Who Wins and Loses in Trump’s Proposed Budget,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/15/us/politics/trump-budget-proposal.html?_r=0>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Banned Nerve Agent Sarin Used in Syria Chemical Attack, Turkey Says,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/chemical-attack-syria.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iraq-mosul-casualties-20170405-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iraq-mosul-casualties-20170405-story.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “We Cannot Bomb Our Way to Peace in Mosul,” Sojourners, <https://sojo.net/articles/we-cannot-bomb-our-way-peace-mosul>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” <http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)