

It's Palm Sunday and it's Passion Sunday – two events, two different roads into Jerusalem, one stunning outcome. The Palm Sunday road begins at Bethphage. Today, the Church of Bethphage sits on the east slope of the Mount of Olives. To the west is the Judean desert and the ancient roads that drop down to Jericho and from there northward to Galilee. If you walk about 1,000 yards east of the Church of Bethphage to the ridge top of the Mount of Olives, you can look across the Kidron Valley into Jerusalem.

We began this morning by recreating a walk on the road down that same hillside, spreading branches and shouting “Hosannas!” The disciples and the crowd following Matthew’s Jesus down that road and into Jerusalem assume that they are escorting the Jewish man riding a donkey who will re-establish the Davidic monarchy by defeating the Roman Empire. They cry “Hosanna,” meaning literally “save us now,” evoking their expectations for a triumphant military campaign. At the same time, through a gate on the opposite side of Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate rides into the city on a war horse. But the crowd with Jesus are certain that their new Messiah will give them victory in battle.

Jesus did not provide that kind of victory.

Instead, acting in full alignment with God’s yearning, Jesus showed all creation the lengths to which the Holy One will go to be in communion with us. What God gave us instead of a coup d’état was a stunning exposure to the mystery of God at work in the midst of betrayal, injustice and brutality. The road that people expected to carry them to safety led only to more violence, suppression and cruelty.

But there was another road. There *is still* a second road. And they are so close to each other.

The Kidron Valley between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem also divides the Mount of Olives from Mount Zion, the home of Caiaphas. From the Mount of Olives, you can see the Passion Sunday road that Jesus walked from Mount Zion into Jerusalem. That road, he walked alone. Along that road, cries of “Hosanna” were replaced with cries of “Crucify him.” Today, the Church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu stands on the traditional site of the home of Caiaphas, where Peter denied his teacher. Just outside the church, you can see the ancient Roman stones lining the road that led an innocent man to his death.

It's Palm Sunday and it's Passion Sunday – two events, two different roads into Jerusalem, one stunning outcome. The Palm Sunday road where a crowd walked with their new Messiah into Jerusalem. The Passion Sunday road, the lonely, nearly unbearable path that Jesus walked alone to the cross,

deserted by most of his followers. The road that passed through humiliation, violence and death into resurrection life.

It's Palm Sunday and it's Passion Sunday. And here at the beginning of Holy Week, as Archbishop Rowan Williams once pointed out, we stand with Jesus before the gates of a city.

"At these city gates," Archbishop Williams said, "we see the possibilities. We can enter with Jesus and walk with him to his garden of new life. Or we can enter and find ourselves caught up in the murderous crowds, and, at the end of it all, find ourselves with hands both empty and bloodstained. Or we can stay at the gates, unwilling to commit ourselves because we know that as soon as we enter there will be trial and suffering; but if we stay there, we shall never reach the garden."

Matthew's Jesus walked the road that he had talked about from the very beginning. Jesus lived among us as the *shalom* given by God; the radical well-being granted to all creation, showing up without armor, telling us to put away the sword and teaching us how to live in the light. He lived a life that exposed the fallacy of self-serving power, greed and cruelty.

This is the heart of the Christian message, right here in the life of Jesus Christ where these two roads meet. This is the crossroad where the unfiltered worst of human bitterness and self-righteous rage meets Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God's love and life.

And that, of course, is why he had to die.

Jesus had to die, but not because he had no choice. He could have slipped back into the silence of the Judean desert. Instead, he chose to go into Jerusalem.

Jesus had to die, but not because he had no power. He could have called down twelve legions of angels to slaughter the entire Roman army. Instead, he leaned into the hopes of his followers for an earthly king and by refusing to meet brutality with brutality, he became the King of Kings.

Jesus had to die, but not because he had no fame. He could have incited the crowds who had followed him into Jerusalem to rally and riot. Instead, he drew the attention of the authorities who had the most to lose and exposed their scapegoating for what it was; violence that served the few at the expense of the many. Self-serving viciousness carried out on behalf of those who had the responsibility to protect those on the margins rather than to crush them.

Jesus had to die, but not because it was God's will. He had to die so that we could finally see that the mind of Christ is one set on love, mutuality and

generosity. He had to die so that we had evidence of God's self-emptying response to our indifference toward each other and our drive to dominate.

It's Palm Sunday and it's Passion Sunday – two events, two different roads into Jerusalem, one stunning outcome. The easier road promises that some earthly power will rescue us and keep us from ever being a victim again. The easier, more popular road promises security and certainty. The easier road ends in impotence and destruction.

What only appears to be the lonelier road takes us into the city, to the cross and then to the tomb. But the end of that road is the recognition that the Risen Christ has been walking beside us the entire time. On the Passion road, resurrected life waits for us. There the gates open to a new Jerusalem, a place where God transfigures our rage into joy; our self-glorification into gratitude; our wounds into sources of light and love.

This morning, we choose the road we want to walk. It may not be the road we have been walking up to this morning. But this is the beginning of a new Holy Week and we have a new opportunity. So, what I want to say to you is this: let his walk be your walk. Put on the mind of Christ and follow him with willing humility into a world in turmoil. Put on the mind of Christ and walk the road that respects the dignity of every human being; the road that leads to justice and peace among all people. Let his walk be your walk.

---

Works consulted:

Rowan Williams' sermon preached in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, 2003.

Wright, N. T. *Matthew for Everyone: Chapters 16-28*. London: SPCK, 2004.