

Call to Worship

Who is this that enters the city? Who is this riding into our lives in humility but with all the authority of God?

It is the Christ who comes among us in grace.

Who is this who dares to ride toward our life, facing us in determined truth, and refusing to bow to our compromises?

It is the Christ who comes among us in truth.

Who is this who will not wear the garb of power, who simply stays in open-armed humanity while those who are confronted plan their deathly responses?

It is the Christ who comes among us in costly love. Let us bring our praises.

Prayer of Invocation

Come among us again, in triumph, not with the trappings the world expects, but as the servant who set us an example of humility and hope.

We, your worshipping people, wave our branches of victory to proclaim to the world that you, the Blessed One, have come into our midst. Hosanna! Lord, Open us to all that you would have us be, for you and for others. 'Breakthrough' into our lives and our church with new possibilities. Amen.

The Word

Matthew 21:1-11

Common English Bible

When they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave two disciples a task.

He said to them, "Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter, you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with it. Untie them and bring them to me. If anybody says anything to you, say that the Lord needs it."

He sent them off right away. Now this happened to fulfill what the prophet said, *Say to Daughter Zion, "Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey's offspring."*

The disciples went and did just as Jesus had ordered them. They brought the donkey and the colt and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them.

Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. "Who is this?" they asked.

The crowds answered, "It's the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Living the Word

When I think of a triumphal entry, I remember an afternoon of a Hayward High School Homecoming Football Game. The afternoon included a homecoming parade down Main Street. The Band marched by playing the school song as the crowd lining the streets clapped and sang.

Then one of the City Fire Trucks came by with all of the football players in their football jerseys shouting "We're Number One! We're Number One!" Behind them was a pickup truck filled with Cheerleaders with pom-poms waving. On the side of the truck were big signs that declared "De-rail the Spooner Rails." There was even a King...riding in a borrowed little red Convertible, with a red velvet crown.

On the same afternoon in Spooner: The afternoon included a homecoming parade down Main Street. The Band marched by playing the school song as the crowd lining the streets clapped and sang. Then one of the City Fire Trucks came by with all of the football players in their football jerseys shouting "We're Number One! We're Number One!" Behind them was a pickup truck filled with Cheerleaders with pom-poms waving.

On the side of the truck were big signs that declared "Knock the Wind out of the Hayward Hurricanes." There was even a King...riding in a borrowed little red Convertible, with a red velvet crown. On that evening, who would win? Who would lose? Often winners create losers...But even before the game there is that moment of hope...When anyone can claim: "We're Number One!"

Today is Palm Sunday and we recognize the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. A team of disciples surround him, paving his way with their cloaks. They are entering the city openly and unafraid for they have with them the King.

A squad of cheerleaders are waving palm branches, shouting "Hosanna – Save us! Deliver us! We believe you can! We know you can! A borrowed ride on a donkey...All for a King!

Often winning creates losers...that was the kind of king that the team and cheerleaders wanted. One who would destroy the oppressors. On who would free the oppressed. Even before this game, there is a moment of hope...when anyone can claim: "We're number one!

But Jesus was on a different mission than to win the game in the usual way. He did come to free the oppressed. And even for Christ there must have been some moments of hope as he heard those around him affirming him as king.

Yet according to Luke when they arrived at the city, Jesus wept over Jerusalem and *"He said, "If only you knew on this of all days the things that lead to peace."*

There is a phrase that fits well here: "It's not about winning – it's about how you play the game!" Football coaches might say that – Politicians might say it for the TV cameras...Parents might say it to their children. But we know that Christ was the authentic example of it...in his life and especially as he faced the city of Jerusalem that day and the cross in the days ahead. It's not about defeating anyone.

Small disclaimer here: Competition is not a bad thing. When I am with my family, we often will play cribbage. It gives us time together and we chat and catch up with each other while we play.

I am optimistic enough about the randomness of the fall of the cards... anyone can win or lose. Yet it stimulates my brain for counting and sorting that is a positive for me.

I tease all of the football fans about the necessity of the sport in their lives...but I recognize the benefit of learning positive team work, though I have never understood the thrill of tackle, when people run into each other with all of their considerable force and knock each other down. Still, Boxing is even more brutal...

What it really boils down to is that it is not about defeating anyone. It is about how you lead others. It is not about conquering the system, but working the system to change it for the better. Good leaders sacrifice themselves for others.

Upon returning from a year in Iraq, Sergeant Michael Thomas of the Colorado National Guard wrote this: After months of extending our stay in Iraq, our unit was finally going home. The year had felt long enough.

We had missed birthdays, births, anniversaries, Thanksgiving and Christmas, and when our final plane was hit by a de-icing truck in Germany, we were left feeling as though we'd never get back to our families.

We were ordered to de-plane in order to wait for the next flight. Sitting in the airport throughout the night, we called our families with the bad news. We waited for what seemed like an eternity before finally catching another plane.

Thirty-six hours after our scheduled arrival, we landed in Bangor, Maine. It was 3am. We were tired, hungry, and as desperate as we were to get to Colorado, our excitement was tainted with bitterness. While we were

originally told our National Guard deployment would be mere months, here we were – 369 days later – frustrated and angry.

As I walked off the plane, I was taken aback: in the small, dimly-lit airport, a group of elderly veterans lined up to shake our hands. Some were standing, some confined to wheelchairs, all wore their uniform hats. Their now-feeble right hand arms stiffened in salutes, their left hands holding coffee, snacks and cell phones for us.

As I made my way through the line, each man thanked me for my service, I choked back tears. Here we were, returning from one year in Iraq where we had portable DVD players, three square meals and phones, being honored by men who had crawled through mud for years with little more than the occasional letter from home.

These soldiers – many of whom had lost limbs and comrades – shook our hands proudly, as if our service could somehow rival their own. We soon learned that this VFW group had not only waited for more than a day in the airport for our arrival. But that they were doing so for all the returning soldiers.

When the time came to fly home to Colorado, we were asked by our commander if we would like to join the VFW. Every hand in the unit went up eagerly – including my own.

Looking back on my year in Iraq, I can honestly say that my perception of the experience was changed; not so much by the soldiers with whom I served – though I consider them my saving grace – by the soldiers who welcomed us home. For it is those men who reminded me what serving my country is really about.

Sometimes we win by losing ourselves; we receive by giving. It's not about making losers of others. But it is about including everyone in the winning.

Psychologist Carl Jung once said "that a great deal of institutional religion seems designed to prevent the faithful from having a spiritual experience. Instead of teaching people how to live in peace, religious leaders often concentrate on marginal issues: Can women or gay people be ordained? Is contraception permissible? Is evolution compatible with the first chapter of Genesis?"

Instead of bringing people together, these distracting preoccupations actually encourage policies of exclusion, since they tend to draw attention to the differences between 'us' and 'them.' These policies of exclusion can have dramatic consequences."

Religious Scholar Karen Armstrong says: "When people feel that their backs are to the wall, they often lash out aggressively. Hence the hatred that continues to cause so much turmoil around the world. Yet such religiously inspired hatred represents a major defeat for religion.

That's because at their core, all the great world faiths – including Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam – agree on the supreme importance of compassion. The early sages and prophets all taught their followers to cultivate a habit of empathy for all living beings.

Jesus taught the Golden Rule in this way: he told his followers to love even their enemies and never to judge or retaliate. If someone struck them on the face, they must turn the other cheek.

In his parable of the Last Day, when the King comes to judge the world, those who enter the Kingdom do not do so because they have adopted the correct theology or the right customs, but because they have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, and visited the sick and the criminals in prison.

St. Paul agreed. Christians could have faith that moved mountains, but if they lacked charity it was worth nothing.

The practice of compassion has to be consistent; it does not work if it is selective. If, as Jesus explained, we simply love those who love us, no effort is involved; we are simply banking up our own ego and we remain trapped in the selfishness that we are supposed to transcend.

That is why Jesus demanded that his followers love their enemies. They were required to feel with people who would never feel affection for them, and extend their sympathy without expecting any benefits for themselves."

Armstrong continues by saying: "I have noticed, however, that compassion is not a popular virtue. In my lectures I have sometimes seen members of the audience glaring at me defiantly. [Their eyes saying] where is the fun of religion if you can't disapprove of other people!

There are some people, I suspect, who would feel cheated if, when they arrived at heaven, if they found everybody else there as well. Heaven would not be heaven unless those who reached it could peer over the celestial parapets and watch other unfortunates roasting below."

Is it so? Have we come this Palm Sunday to win at the expense of others? Do we cheer only as long as we are ahead of the others? Are we an exclusive team of disciples after our own goals? If 'we're number 1!' where does that place everyone else?

What is 'the buzz around town?' Today is a day of a Victory Parade, because we have all won through the surrender – on his own – of Jesus, to the will of God. The people that day and many today, thought the battle was yet ahead, but there is no need for a battle, there is no need for winners and losers. Holy week is a reminder that Jesus died so we don't have to be better or worse than anyone else.

If you are available on Friday at 1pm we will gather here for the Ecumenical Good Friday Service. You may remember a time when some churches thought that they were the only ones with the truth. On Friday we will share worship with other Christian believers of our community, with the understanding that none of us have all of the answers and all are welcome to come and experience Christ together in this place.

And of course, next Sunday morning we will celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, as Easter morning arrives. As I often tell people, if they ask or not...we have worship every Sunday at 10 AM, you are welcome to join us...

Who might you invite? Pick a day –Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday or Saturday. Don't worry about offending them by asking; don't worry about how they will receive the message that is given. God will take care of all of that.

Once upon a time, God asked a man to push a really big rock. The man pushed, but the rock didn't budge. The man pushed and pushed that rock, but it still didn't move.

He got discouraged and after only a short time he stopped pushing and dropped to the ground feeling defeated. He yelled at God: "Why did you ask me to move a rock that won't budge?" God replied: "I never asked you to move the rock, just to push it..."

God doesn't always expect us to be successful, but he does expect us to try. This week let your voice be a part of the buzz around town, sharing the Good News!