

Palm Sunday (B). March 25, 2018. Mark 11:1-11.

This is one of those rare days when there actually is a company line on the gospel reading in the Episcopal church. You see, on Friday two busloads of Chicago Episcopalians loaded up to ride all night to DC for the March for Our Lives. The plan was then to ride back all night and make it to church on time today. I haven't heard whether that part of the plan worked or not. But here's the thing: before they left, they blessed and distributed palm branches.

Those of us who marched with the bishop in Chicago and arrived early at the meeting place were also given palms. The claim these organizers were making was that the March for Our Lives against a system that does not mind the murder of our children was itself a part of our Palm Sunday observance. Or even in the words of one priest, "this is our true Palm Sunday procession." I am not a natural-born marcher. If you put 30,000 people on the streets for any cause, I guarantee that I am among the most awkward and uncomfortable participants. I can't even process out of church without high-fiving five year olds and singing nonsense words to the hymns. So since it's something I do, but don't relish, I am less eager to jump at this analogy than some of my colleagues.

Here's the best case I can make for it: Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at the head of a ragtag contingent of fair-weather followers is a well-organized, deliberately provocative display that brings the truth to the heart of a system that operates by the power of death. It is the initiation of a planned confrontation. The Roman Empire rules Jerusalem by the logic of death and the religious establishment maintains social and economic power by collaborating. Jesus comes and refuses to use the weapons of death to fight death, but brings the uncompromising truth that love is the heart of the world and those whose currency is death are in danger of losing their souls.

Then the church's participation in the march yesterday is less about demanding specific policies, which is clearly the role of Christian citizens but perhaps not the role of the church. Instead, the church is there because our current rulers also work within a logic of death, unperturbed by the murders of children, and we follow our lord in bringing truth to the powers and principalities of our time. Refusing the tools of the enemy, hundreds of thousands of people across the country came together under the leadership of children to say enough is enough and we will not continue in a way of life that treats murder as the cost of a few companies doing business and a few men staying in power.

There, that's the best I can do for the company line and I do indeed see the promise of it. My colleagues who consider hands-on activism to be at the core of their vocation can probably do better with it. But I am haunted this week by the last line of the Palm Sunday gospel: Then Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. This line to me is key to understanding Palm Sunday because it makes it clear that the march is only prologue. After this exhilarating provocative scene that seems to announce that the king has arrived, Jesus goes in, looks around, and then retires to the suburbs with his friends. This is not the main event. This is how Jesus announces that the conflict with the ways of this world has begun.

The rest of the week is the main event. It is during the rest of the week that Jesus actually takes the fight to those who live by death and those who collaborate with them. And he does it without ever striking a literal blow. He does it with the actions we will

commemorate throughout the rest of the week: making the new commandment of a serving love the foundation of the resistance, instituting a shared holy meal as the central ritual of the church, and finally overcoming death and the grave by refusing to make them weapons for his own ends.

I don't know what the kids who are changing the world have planned next. I'm sure there will be a next, because the march is always only prologue. I don't know whether the church will always be arm in arm with the movement our children have started. We have our own agenda that joins clearly against the murder of children and the mad logic of conjoined death and greed, but may part ways at other times, on other issues. All of that is fine. Whatever our agenda is, it gets spelled out this week. Yes, in a confrontation with the empire that lives by death and those whose positions of power depend on it. And with the response of love, and giving, and a ferocious commitment to the God of life, who calls us all out of our habits of collaboration and more deeply into love. Palm Sunday is only the prologue. Amen.