

## **Palm Sunday C. March 20, 2016. Luke 19:28-40.**

It is, to say the least, interesting to observe Palm Sunday during campaign season. Now, when the political signs from the Illinois primaries are still cluttering up our yards and public spaces, we come to the most overtly and obviously political act of Jesus' ministry. Hopefully, with the passions of last Tuesday still so fresh in our hearts, we're in the right frame of mind to see the political nature of this story. Of course, Jesus talks about "the kingdom of God" all the time in the gospels, and a kingdom is obviously a political unit, but two thousand years of Christian history have made it very easy to gloss over those sayings as being spiritual, and somehow therefore not having much to do with how our common life is actually, physically ordered today. But only a deliberate misreading can strip today's gospel of its physical, literal political nature.

The never before ridden colt, the clothes strewn over the ground, these are symbols for a literal king entering his capitol. And of course his followers save us the trouble of having to decipher all the symbolism of what is going on by just naming it: blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. I urge you, friends, do not sanitize this scene by pretending that it's about souls and not about bodies, that the call for peace and glory in heaven precludes relevance for the earth.

It is striking at this time when we all have politics on our minds. When we're all terrified that if our candidate doesn't win, it might be the end of the world; and if their candidate does win, it will *definitely* be the end of the world. So thank goodness we have this political text this morning to hearten us, to affirm what we already think, to comfort us in our fear of those other folks. [Just kidding.] But there is a problem. Like many political rallies, this story doesn't really have much political content. Or rather, our reading this morning is separated from the context that would give it political content. Jesus does this big political act, entering Jerusalem as the king—but that's kind of it. He just arrives. He doesn't secure funding for social security or cut taxes or engage in clear-sighted police reform.

This lesson is empty of political content because it is only act one. Palm Sunday sets the stage for the rest of Holy Week. This triumphal entry alerts us that we're dealing with a king. It is the rest of Holy Week that shows us what Jesus' kingship and Christian politics look like. If you want to know what a Christian politics here on earth looks like, find a way to immerse yourself in the liturgies and bible stories of this week. But I will give a few hints. It is a brief and unorthodox reign in Jerusalem, but the actions that Jesus took and we commemorate this week are the content of a Christian politics. Needless to say, this content is rather different from most of our contemporary campaigns.

Our first installment after today is Maundy Thursday. On Maundy Thursday, we mark both the institution of the Lord's Supper and Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet, with the new commandment to love one another. Just a few days after this triumphal entry and his proclamation as king, Jesus gets down on his hands and knees and washes the feet of his friends and followers. It is decidedly undignified and unkingly. In terms of Palm Sunday and the kingship of Jesus, it is a radical reorientation of power. Maundy Thursday tells us that a Christian politics involves physical, real, even kind of gross acts of service to others—even those unlike us, especially those we might think are beneath us.

It's not the politics we expect from a king, but it is a real and visceral pattern for the ordering of our common life. In the kingdom of Jesus, the powerful set aside their privilege to engage in direct acts of love and service to others. They take off their robe and get down on the dirty floor to scrub those dishonorable parts of the body, the feet. And in the Lord's Supper, the king's work is to dissolve hierarchies by making a disparate group of individuals one with him and each other through a blessed, shared meal. The king doesn't stand on ceremony to remain above others—he uses ceremony to break down barriers and create a shared life. In the logic of Maundy Thursday, power is only valuable to the extent that it is used in practical service to others and given away to create a common life.

Then we will move to Good Friday, where we will focus our attention on the crucifixion. Now of course lots can be said about the meaning of Good Friday and the crucifixion, but along the theme of a Christian politics, I think that the most obvious thing to say about its meaning is that Good Friday makes Christian violence an impossibility. On Good Friday, Jesus makes it clear that we can die for what we believe, but we can never kill for it. We will hear how when the police come to arrest Jesus, Peter offers to defend him with a sword and Jesus not only forbids this, but undoes the violence that Peter starts—if defending the very person of Jesus Christ is not a justification for violence, then rest assured, no Christian cause can be an inspiration for striking another. The politics of this king will pursue persuasion, rather than coercion, even unto death. Love, rather than survival, is the goal of a Christian politics.

Saturday is silent until the Vigil, when we gather together and recite the whole history of God's saving work among God's people, culminating in the resurrection. It's rather important that Jesus isn't around for the first half of this service, as we go through the greatest hits of the Hebrew Bible. So it's a little off topic for the reign of this king we celebrated this morning, except that Jesus was acting all along in continuity with God's history of saving God's people. And over and over again the stories we hear Saturday night are about God calling forth life where there seems to be none, about God inspiring hope where there seemed to be only despair. This is what the reign of God looks like: a constant showing up for the beloved people, an unflinching commitment to inviting people into love and relationship, rather than submission and fear.

By the end of Holy Week, we are prone to forget the kingly entrance. The shouts of Hosanna become just the emotional foil to the shouts of Crucify Him. But this is a mistake. It is not the case that Jesus' term as king in Jerusalem was thwarted—he behaved exactly according to the politics of God's kingdom. Pomp set aside for service. Power used only to create community. A refusal of coercion that is based on valuing love more highly than survival. And a never-failing commitment to finding and nurturing life in the most unexpected places. I know, it doesn't sound very practical for a political agenda. But in defense of the prudence of the politics of Christ, I'll just say this: Christ is still here, and Caesar is not. Amen.