

## WHEN WHAT SHOULD HAVE HAPPENED DOES

This is Palm Sunday, the day we reflect on what we call the Triumphal Entry. It is traditionally a day of celebration when the Church of Jesus Christ joins the crowds outside Jerusalem in acknowledging Jesus as Lord and King. It is also the first day of Holy Week, a week that culminates in Jesus' death, burial and resurrection.

By any reckoning the Triumphal Entry was short-lived. It took place as millions of Jews flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, Israel's greatest feast. At Passover Israel remembered what God did when he redeemed his people from slavery in Egypt. Jesus chose this time of national holiday and anticipation to offer himself formally as God's Messiah.

At his direction, Jesus' disciples borrowed a donkey's colt to be his ride into the city. His men made a makeshift saddle with their coats and the procession began.

The disciples led the way, no doubt overcome by the realization that finally, this could be it. Jesus was declaring himself publicly. They ignited the crowds frenzy and for the first time Jesus did not restrain their enthusiasm. Word raced through the crowd and on ahead into the city. Pilgrims on the crowded highway cut branches and spread them on the road while others threw down their coats, providing what we would call a red carpet. As the surge crested the Mount of Olives, other pilgrims raced out from the city to join the impromptu demonstration.

They shouted in wild celebration and praise: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" The words fit a crowd welcoming their King into his city.

The religious leaders were alarmed. They knew what was happening and they begged Jesus to make his disciples stop. Jesus replied simply that if the crowds were silent, the very stones would cry out! Creation itself would take up her Creator's praise.

When I see news footage of demonstrations and celebrations in the Middle-East, I get some idea of what this might have looked like. It was totally unlike parades in America. We value order and the rule of law. Our parades are carefully planned and patrolled. We expect the participants to keep their heads.

This noisy procession was intoxicated by the ancient hope of Israel: Messiah! Heir to David's kingdom! With a life of its own the crowd moved toward the ancient capital, Jerusalem.

I wonder how it ended.

None of the Gospel writers tell us. It just all went away.

I wonder if it unraveled when Jesus started crying. Luke tells us: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes'" (Luke 19:41-42).

I wonder if the crowds were unnerved to see their "king" grieving over his city, especially when he went on to say: "The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

How would that speech play in a presidential campaign? Talk about raining on your own parade. Jesus' grim prediction might have had a chilling effect on the crowd. However it ended, the end result of the triumphal entry was nothing, *nada*, zip, zero. This should have been the time when Israel welcomed Jesus with open arms. He should have ascended to the throne of David. There might have been a coronation. Instead, it all just went away.

The Hebrew prophet Daniel describes a scene for us, set in God's future, when what

should have happened, does. This is the Daniel famous for spending a night safely with lions, whose three friends were fireproof in a Babylonian furnace. We know the stories of Daniel. We're not as familiar with the visions he recorded.

Turn with me to Daniel 7. We're going to read verses 9-14, but first let's set the stage. The passage is part of an apocalyptic dream God gave Daniel outlining in broad strokes the course of human history. Daniel saw four beasts emerge from a churned up sea. The sea probably represents the chaotic turbulence of humankind. The beasts symbolize kingdoms with their rulers.

The first was a winged lion whose wings are torn off. The winged lion was Babylon whose magnificent empire was about to be crushed and humbled.

The second was a bear raised up on one side. Conservative scholars believe this represents the Medes and the Persians, a coalition empire dominated by Persia.

The third beast was a leopard with four wings. This is widely regarded as Greece who conquered the world under Alexander the Great. Following Alexander's death, his empire was divided into four smaller kingdoms ruled by four lesser kings.

The last terrifying beast is Rome. Unlike the others, Rome crushes those it conquers. It has ten horns, symbolizing rulers. Among these a little horn emerges who seems to have all of the characteristics of the man we call Antichrist. Later in the chapter Daniel will ask an angel for an explanation of the fourth beast who was so disturbing to him. The angel says: "The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king [the little horn] will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. He will speak against the Most High and oppress his saints and try to change the set times and the laws. The saints will be handed over to him for a time, times and half a time" (Dan. 7:24-25).

And of course, we all want to know who the 10 kings are. Who is the little horn who speaks boastfully against God? Does he have a name? When does he show up? Is he alive today?

I don't know. And I'm not at all sure it was God's purpose to let us in on his secrets. What seems to be apparent about the vision of the four beasts is an unfolding world history dominated by a succession of kingdoms marked by their beast-like inhumanity. Nothing in this world is as it should be. Sinful humankind, it seems, brings order out of chaotic cultures only by crushing force.

As this scenario unfolds on earth, something altogether different and wonderful takes place in heaven. Let's read Daniel 7:9-12.

Daniel sees a time when God is about to intervene. Heaven's court is called into session. God himself, the Ancient of Days, takes his seat and calls for the books to be opened.

Daniel sees a blazing throne mounted on flaming wheels. A river of molten lava streams out before the throne. The righteous Judge of all the earth ascends his throne attended by myriads of heavenly beings.

Daniel sees this. And at the same time he sees the blasphemous little horn on earth, making his wars and boasting of great things. Daniel watches until God intervenes and this last terrible kingdom with its presumptuous ruler is destroyed, consumed in the river of fire before the throne.

Then Daniel sees a new figure, a son of man: man as God intended him to be at creation, before we gave away the best parts of our humanity when we fell into sin. This is a man like no other: verses 13-14.

Daniel saw Jesus. How do we know that? After his arrest, when Jesus was on trial before the Sanhedrin, the highest ruling Jewish body, paid informants brought many false charges against Jesus. None stuck. Finally, the high priest cut to the heart of things: "... The high priest said to him, 'I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of

God.’

‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied. ‘But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?’

‘He is worthy of death,’ they answered” (Matthew 26:63-66).

The men in the Sanhedrin knew their Scriptures. They knew immediately that Jesus had applied the vision of Daniel to himself. It was a bold, unmistakable claim to be Messiah, Daniel’s Son of man to whom God would give authority, glory and sovereign power. That’s why they wanted to kill him.

Jesus would replace the world’s long procession of beasts—inhuman kingdoms ruled by arrogant, defiant men. Jesus would take his rightful place on David’s throne and all peoples everywhere in this whole wide world would worship and serve him forever and ever.

And here we need a rousing *Hallelujah Chorus! Joy To The World* will be caroled truly when earth receives her King.

I wonder what might have been if what should have happened on Palm Sunday, had happened. We can’t imagine or answer all the “what if” questions. And in retrospect, what actually did happen was absolutely necessary. It all fit into God’s great plan to provide eternal redemption.

But the triumphal entry into Jerusalem was only the faintest shadow of Jesus’ real triumphal entry onto the world’s stage. It will be an unveiling, really. Because Jesus has already assumed his place beside the Father on his throne. The Bible says that after Jesus offered himself on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins, “...he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool...” (Hebrews 10:12-13).

That’s why Jesus could tell his disciples after his resurrection: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18).

Already Jesus has received authority, glory and sovereign power. He waits for that great day when the Father assembles his court, takes his seat, and reveals his Son from heaven. Then Jesus will return on the clouds of heaven. Then all people and all nations everywhere will serve him.

But not yet. Once again, we live in the time between the already and the not yet. Now, already, Christ waits in heaven for the Father’s appointed time. Now, as the Apostle John reminds us, “...this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come” (1 John 2:18).

Christ-followers defy the beast and with bold faith follow the Son of Man. What we do here every Sunday morning is an act of service and worship anticipating the triumphal unveiling from heaven of our true King. Every obedience we offer Jesus now expresses our allegiance to him and our rejection of all in this world that is antichrist.

We know the beast must die and the Son of Man ascend his throne. So we choose now to serve the true King, Jesus Christ our Lord.

What do you think life will be like under the earthly reign of Jesus? How will nature be different? How will kingdoms settle differences? Will the economy be prosperous?

More to the point, how do you think you personally will live when Jesus comes to rule the earth?

If Jesus has already taken his seat at the Father’s right hand, and if all authority has already been given to him, and if we walk by faith and not by sight, really believing these things belong to the “what is” realm of truth, then an obvious question begs to be asked: How are we bringing our lives now into conformity to that truth? Shouldn’t how we live now be something

like how we think we will live then?

We have the privilege now of letting our hope inform our conduct, serving Jesus now both as anticipation and as acknowledgment.

The crowd's enthusiasm for Jesus on Palm Sunday fizzled out as soon as the parade was over. The excitement and anticipation all went away. People picked up their cloaks and the road crews cleared away the branches. Everyone went back to normal life.

We believe what should have happened has happened, and will happen. Unlike the Palm Sunday event, the parade isn't over. It hasn't even begun!

So don't fizzle! We live in a new normal defined by the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, has received all authority in heaven and on earth, glory and sovereign power. We are those privileged to worship and serve him now, by faith, in anticipation of that great day when God seats his court, ascends his throne, and reveals his Son from heaven.

Amen.