

## **A Fool's Parade**

Luke 19:28-40; 23:1-49

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion\ Year C  
2010

March 28,

**O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.**

April Fool's Day is one of those peculiar celebrations, which really has no business being on the calendar. Left over from the Middle Ages, it surfaces year after year, chuckling with a silly and unappreciated candor not unlike a court jester at a state funeral. It teases and taunts its victims with false alarms and delights in sending poor dupes on fruitless errands. There is something wholly irreverent about April Fool's Day, almost as if it intentionally thumbs its nose at what is proper and even sacred. The irony that such a day, dedicated to pranks and folly, should happen to fall within the most solemn of all weeks in the Church's liturgical calendar, is perhaps a little more than most of us can bear. We are tempted, of course to haul the April fool out by his ear, but should we do so, we would miss the fact that there is something oddly, even tantalizingly appropriate in bearing his presence during this upcoming Holy week. After all, the last Sunday of Lent (also known as Palm Sunday) seems to harbor the very foolishness we are so keen to escape. Today, we celebrate a Sunday filled with contradictions; a Sunday of strange and almost irrational confluences, of triumph and tragedy, of palm and passion, a Sunday where gentleness and severity collide with each other in unexpected, even darkly comical ways.

We call today "Palm Sunday" presumably because of the palm fronds undulating around Jesus as he enters Jerusalem. Never mind the fact, that three out of the four gospels say nothing about them. Then again, the gospels are not gardening guides, at least not in the usual sense, so we can excuse them for being less than observant on matters of horticulture. They do, however, manage to make note of the branches torn and the cloaks thrown in Christ's path. While the palms may not be included in the gospels' details, it is, nevertheless, the palms that stick in our heads creating a large leafy sea, whose cresting waves roar "Hosanna" as they lap against our Lord. Our hearts latch onto this scene of riotous festivity as Jesus' impromptu ticker-tape parade winds through the city, wishfully resembling one of those 1950's Hollywood triumphs in which all the Roman soldiers speak the Queen's English. We try, desperately, to remember Palm Sunday as a pageant fit for a king. To remember it, any other way, would probably hurt too much and challenge us too greatly.

Saint Luke, however, will not permit our memories to wilt from what is coming or our desires to be placated by wishful thinking. His account of Christ's arrival in the Holy City is appropriately subdued, certainly less crowded and noisy, than the version told by the other gospel writers. His account begins in the suburbs, between Bethphage and Bethany, to be exact. Jesus and the disciples are whiling away the afternoon, reclining among the trees in a hillside olive grove, when all of a sudden, our Lord, who as Saint attests "set his face toward Jerusalem" decides that there is no time like the present

in which to begin the end game. He asks two of the disciples to head into a nearby village. “As soon as you get inside the town limits,” Jesus says, “you will find a donkey tethered there. Untie it and bring the animal back here.” The looks on the disciples’ faces must have said it all. Anticipating their objections, Jesus adds, “now if anyone says anything such as ‘Why are you untying the donkey?’ just tell them that the Lord needs it.” The disciples, who are by now used to Jesus doing rather interesting and edgy things, nervously amble off toward town to commandeer the creature. A short while later, they return with the kidnapped donkey in tow, having explained to the animal’s undoubtedly puzzled owners that God had just declared eminent domain over their possession. The disciples, without a moment’s hesitation, throw cloaks over the mule’s back and hoist Jesus into the saddle.

The procession begins and it is certainly the oddest procession that Jerusalem, or Littleton for that matter, has ever witnessed. Saint Luke’s tacit refusal to give into our desire for pomp and palm trees shines forth. There are no branches being torn from the azaleas and waved in triumph. There are no “Hosanna, loud, hosannas.” There isn’t even an adoring, if ultimately fickle, public. The only cries of praise being heard on this cavalcade are those issuing forth from the disciples. Over and over, Jesus’ friends and followers shout: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!” Their parade is a relatively modest affair, meaningful only to those who have eyes to see. The crowds, which one would expect, are largely absent. Perhaps they have simply retreated to the other side of the city, to the Western gate where the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate is making his own entrance into Jerusalem, having just arrived from his provincial palace at Caesarea Maritima. Or perhaps, the crowds are congregating at the Temple, so as to hear one of those overdone sermons for which Caiaphas is so famous. Or maybe, they aren’t actually absent after all, just simply indifferent to Christ and his parade, uninvolved with the one who would involve them in his dying and rising. They look upon him, merely as an oddity, as a Messianic fool, as a joke that doesn’t even have the good taste to tell itself and then disappear. And, you know, who can blame them? Jesus is sitting on a plodding donkey after all. His followers are yelling what sounds like nonsense to anyone who has an ounce of reason. There is nothing in Jesus’ appearance that is even remotely inspiring to a people, who dream that their Messiah will arrive amidst fanfare and war bugles. Jesus and his worshipping throng appear as fools, worthy of no more than a bitter laugh or shake of the head. Saint Luke has no choice but to render the crowds silent as if they weren’t even there, which of course, for all intents and purposes they weren’t. They are passionless, tepid, lukewarm, un-invested. The crowds have as much substance as a ghost at daybreak. They neither join the parade, nor do they oppose its passage. They simply observe and are mildly entertained.

James Ensor, a well-known artist of the late Nineteenth Century, painted what can only be termed a rather “thoughtful commentary” on Luke’s Palm Sunday scene. The painting, entitled *Christ’s Entry Into Brussels*, depicts Jesus, surrounded by light, riding a donkey down the main street of the Belgian capital, though, if truth be told, it could have been just about any street anywhere. All around him, in swirls of vibrant and brash color, are people oblivious to his presence. Some of them are playing musical

instruments, while others are waving political banners. There is a well-fed judge, a decorated general, a bishop entwined with courtesans, and a group of finely dressed ladies on their way to church. All of whom fail to truly see the significance of the one riding into their midst. There is a carnival atmosphere, which leads to the most striking aspect of the painting- the members of the crowd, it seems, are wearing ridiculous masks; masks that betray the grotesque foolishness that lies beneath them. You see, it is not Christ who plays the fool in the painting, but those who stand speechless on the side of the road, looking onward as if Jesus is no more than a dupe on a fruitless errand, when, in fact, the errand upon which he has embarked is the most fruitful of all. The foolish, it would seem, are those of us who through indecision refuse to get in on what Jesus is doing and saying.

Such truth, to their everlasting credit and shame, is ironically seconded by none other than the Pharisees. They seem to sense that there is more to this Jesus than meets the eye. They even go so far as to ask Jesus to stop the parade in this morning's gospel. The tone of their request is so ambiguous that one cannot tell if they are demanding out of irritation or imploring out of need. They may not even know themselves. Their request is imprecise and out-of-character for a notorious group of fussbudgets. Do they want in on what Jesus and his followers are doing? Or do they want them to cease and desist, to shy away from provoking the Romans so that they can get events back under their own control. We will never know, for Jesus, simply looks at them and replies: "If my followers should keep quiet, then the stones themselves would shout out." It seems that some things simply must be said, just as some deeds must be done. Jesus, does not have time for the Pharisees and their tactics, regardless of whether such tactics were intended to delay or dither. He will not stall the appointed hour. He will move headlong into his dying and rising, into the very foolishness of the cross where he will have the last laugh. Of course, anyone can join him on this road- the dithering, the indifferent, the disciplined, no one is excluded, but they will have to follow in his footsteps. And his footsteps demonstrate how even in the hour of our greatest need and suffering, we are to reach out to those in need around us. After all, Christ's gaze and his concern is always directed beyond himself, affirming the disciples, healing the man with the severed ear, comforting the women of Jerusalem, forgiving his executioners and offering salvation to the repentant thief. He shows us how the journey to death, how the process of dying to ourselves includes the giving of life to others. Yes, our palm-bearing procession, may appear foolish to those who pass us by, the procession may even appear foolish to us, but the palms literally and mysteriously bring us to the doorstep of the passion, to the embrace of the cross, to that place where the salvation of the world hangs offering us, even in his last breath, a possibility, a hope, a resurrection at which not even an April fool would sneer.