

The "Heads Down, Thumbs Up" Parade

A sermon based on Mark 11:1-11 and Philippians 2:5-11

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Everyone loves a parade, and through the centuries human beings have found many reasons to assemble in large groups and walk along in some ceremonial fashion. There are military parades and children's parades, Santa Claus parades, May Day parades, ticker-tape parades, and many other parades. Washington has its President's Inaugural Day Parade, while Canada's Mounties have their special parade uniform. Many cities host parades; Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for example, will host a two hour, five kilometre parade in July, attempting to recreate a turn-of-the-century circus street parade. The Milwaukee Parade, according to its promotional literature, will feature "over 50 historic wagons, over 650 horses, cavorting clowns, wild animals in cage wagons, and the fabulous 40-Horse Hitch!" People seem prepared to put a lot of work into parades.

Some parades have a more ceremonial touch. The Olympic Games, for example, traditionally open with the athletes parading into the stadium, led by the Greek team and with the host nation bringing up the rear. Add enough ceremony, and a little religion, and you can call a parade a procession! Add a pope, and you can call it a Papal Procession. Everyone loves a parade, and the Church, through the centuries, has found many occasions to parade and process, one of the most enduring the Palm Sunday Procession, with its waving of palm branches in commemoration of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, a custom that traces back to the fourth century.

Not all church festival parades have endured. For example, Corpus Christi, a festival of the Church established in the thirteenth century (1264) to honour the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, used to be an occasion for splendid outdoor processions in which guilds, merchants, magistrates, nobility and clergy participated, after which mystery and miracle plays were performed in the public square. This parade hit a speed bump during the Reformation, however, perhaps because the Reformers had seen too many believers parade straight to their death!

Parades and Processions Can Go Awry

Which is to say, that while everyone loves a parade, not all parades are positive events! Things can go wrong. We've had Palm Sunday processions at OMC in which we had massive jam-ups here at the front. Quite understandable, with 200 independently-minded people milling about, and especially without the benefit of clear instructions! Sometimes even a procession of two can get confusing. Earlier this week two buses of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate students from Winnipeg, on choir tour near Chicago, made their way onto a toll road. The first bus made it through, but the second bus did not; one of its rear axles was overweight. Today's cell phones make coordinating two vehicles fairly simple, so someone on the second bus phoned someone on the first bus, instructing them to go to the next exit, turn around, and come back.

Meanwhile, the toll booth person advised the driver of the second bus to try another lane. After much manoeuvring in tight quarters, they tried the second lane, but failed

again. They then tried a third lane, this time asking some of the students from the back of the bus to crouch at the front of the bus. And it worked! However, as they got onto the toll road, the first bus was preparing to exit, so someone on the second bus called someone on the first bus, intending to instruct them to stay on the toll road, only the call wouldn't go through! A clever person (Helene Harms) on the second bus suggested they phone her husband (Jake) in Winnipeg, to see if his phone could connect with the first bus, which it did, and after all was said and done the convoy of two got underway.

The logistics of a parade can prove quite complex, even in New Testament times, and what started off that first Palm Sunday as a rather simple march into the Holy City did not remain so for long. The parade began simply enough -- no historic wagons, no cavorting clowns, no wild animals, and certainly not 650 horses, only one! A small colt! Jesus, the rider of the colt, was clearly the focal point of the parade, and the mood was clearly one of joy and celebration! As Mark tells it, "Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields" (Mark 11:8), and both "...those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting" praises! "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (11:9-10)

The mood was clearly one of joy and celebration, and perhaps only Jesus was aware that he was processing into a trap, and that the branches that were strewn across his path in acclamation would soon become the branches that would lacerate the bare flesh of his back. Perhaps the first sign that this parade went awry was that it seemed to fizzle out. One would expect a parade to end with great ceremony or pageantry, but Mark's Gospel ends it abruptly, informing us that Jesus "went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, ...it was already late, (and so) he went out to Bethany with (his disciples)." (Mark 11:11) It appears that the parade lost its momentum, and the crowd quickly dispersed. No doubt some of the disciples returned the colt to its rightful owner, and that was that! End of parade!

The week that follows makes it difficult to believe that it began with a parade. When, on the next day, Jesus returned to the temple, no cloaks were spread before his path, no leafy branches, no Hosannas. Instead, a growing resistance to his teaching began to develop, and a growing determination among the religious leaders to kill Jesus. (Mark 11:18) That was Monday. Tuesday brought the first of a series of confrontations, as the religious leaders tried to trap Jesus into incriminating himself, and as the confrontations intensified, the plot against Jesus thickened. The religious leaders finally identified a disciple willing to betray Jesus, and things pretty much unravelled after that.

Christians are often tempted to trivialize the events of this week, saying that Jesus knew what would happen; that he had to let it happen, for the sake of our redemption; and that he knew it would be okay in the end. His suffering and vulnerability were very real, however, the very lowest point of the week his hours in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus, Mark tells us, "began to be distressed and agitated." (Mark 15:33) He told his disciples that he was "deeply grieved" (14:34), and he pleaded with God that this "hour might pass from him." (14:35). "Abba, Father," he prayed, "for You all things are possible; remove this cup from me..." (14:36) a prayer he prayed repeatedly through that entire night.

The Palm Sunday Parade Route

It's a curious parade route traced by Mark in his story of Christ's Passion from acclamation, to rejection and humiliation; from comfort and honour, to dishonour and suffering and death. It seems to be a route starting high, and going consistently, and metaphorically, downhill!

Someone (Jake Elias) has pointed out, however, that the physical route of that first Palm Sunday parade actually began on a downward slope, and ended going back upward! The parade began as Jesus, on his colt, descended the Mount of Olives, and after crossing the Kidron Valley, ascended the slope of Mount Zion on the way toward the temple. In other words, Jesus' physical descent and subsequent ascent at the beginning of Holy Week may provide a geographic metaphor for the events of the entire week.

Indeed, the same route, or trajectory, is traced by our reading from the New Testament book of Philippians! In this ancient Christian hymn, the author first traces Jesus' downward trajectory, saying, that "though he was in the form of God, (he) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited...." And so he "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:6-8)

The trajectory dips to its lowest point at the cross, but then begins the ascent, as Philippians tells us, "Therefore" "Therefore" in other words, because Jesus was willing to empty himself, to humble himself, to lay aside thoughts of self-interest, self-preservation, self-indulgence "Therefore God...highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue...confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...." (2:9-11)

As we enter Holy Week, there are several opportunities for Christians to express the deep mysteries of their faith with their bodies. There are Palm Sunday processions; we can walk the Way of the Cross, as many of us will do on Good Friday; for some there are Stations of the Cross to acknowledge, as well as various other dramatic re-enactments of Jesus' journey to Golgotha. The Passion of Jesus moves beyond words and takes hold of our feet and our hands. We manage being the reserved people we are -- a few hesitant hand motions during our Lenten prayers of confession, and were we to use some simple gestures to characterize Jesus' Palm Sunday parade, perhaps "Heads down" and "Thumbs up" might serve us well.

There were certainly reasons to keep one's head down on the parade into Jerusalem, for as the accusations and denials, betrayals and insults hurled at Jesus began to accumulate, it would have been hard not to try and duck some of them. Jesus did keep his head down during the week ahead, but not in the cowardly manner of one attempting to dodge the issues or evade tough questions. His head was bowed in a posture of humility. The theme of humility is there right at the beginning of the parade, as Jesus mounts a colt, the humblest of all steeds. It's an Old Testament image (Zechariah 9:9, cited in Matthew 21:5) that illustrates well the Philippian hymn's assertion that Jesus "humbled himself". (Philippians 2:8) Someone seated on a colt, on the foal of an ass, does not quickly bring to mind an image of power, but then humility does not resonate well with our Western mind-set. We understand far better the body language of the "thumbs-up" signal. It's a sign of confidence! In our culture, giving someone a thumbs-up

sign means everything is "A-OK!" We flash the thumbs-up sign when someone is about to take on a new challenge, conveying to them, "You can do it! You're a winner!"

Jesus' humility during Holy Week is evident from his humble choice of steed, right through to his last moment when the Gospel tells us that "he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (John 19:30) We may be tempted to interpret a bowed head, a lowered head, as a sign of resignation and shame, but in Eastern cultures the tradition of bowing has always been a part of refined social etiquette. By bowing to each other, members of Eastern cultures show respect. It is a dignified humility. Jesus bowed, not in a spirit of resignation, but in a spirit of submission, a noble choice for those who understand the difference.

The Palm Sunday Parade Pattern

The Apostle Paul includes the hymn in Philippians, chapter 2, not just to praise Christ, but to plead with Christians and the Christian community to act like Christ. After warning Christians of the dangers of "selfish ambition" and "conceit" (Philippians 2:3), Paul writes, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (2:5), and then follows the hymn extolling Jesus' humility and subsequent exaltation. In other words, this is more than a pretty hymn; it outlines a pattern of Christian behaviour! It's a pattern we have some trouble following, however. It reminds me of the boy playing baseball who, when he stepped up to the plate looked over to his coach, and saw the coach give him the signal to sacrifice bunt. He then promptly proceeded to take three big swings and strike out! The coach ran up to him and said, "Didn't you see me give you the signal to sacrifice." "Yes," replied the boy, "but I didn't really think that you meant it."

The New Testament asks us to follow Christ's trajectory of humility -- of descent, then ascent -- but we're not sure God really meant all that talk about humility and sacrifice, and so we get right to work on ascent, on upward mobility. The lesson of the Palm Sunday parade, however, is that the way to heaven is rather down-to-earth, through the practice of heartfelt humility and service. First "heads down," then "thumbs up," our confidence born, not of our own strength, but out of the bowed-down conviction that we can do "all things through (Christ) who strengthens (us)." (Philippians 4:13)

To join Jesus' Palm Sunday parade is to join an ongoing procession that may involve pain and suffering, but one that ultimately promises triumph over the destructive forces of life. It is, paradoxically, a procession that involves the need for great courage in the face of overwhelming odds, but it promises enduring strength for its courageous participants. The Palm Sunday procession may involve giving up things we hold dear, yet it promises to supply our every need. Early on, the Palm Sunday "Heads down, Thumbs up" Parade may look like it is marching toward a dead end, but we can rest assured that the parade will not stop until it arrives at the Promised Land! (Adapted from Carl B. Rife) Amen! Hallelujah!

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.