

Palm Sunday: Deliverance for God's people

Tomorrow is Palm Sunday. Jesus enters Jerusalem, mounted on a donkey, heralded as Messiah-King by throngs of ecstatic followers. Gathered in the City of David are faithful Jews from throughout the Middle East. They have come to celebrate the Passover, commemorating the deliverance of the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt. Celebrating God's intervention 1200 or so years before, they also pray for deliverance from present oppression.

Passover was never celebrated in a vacuum. For this reason, the Roman occupying force would be fortified and put on constant alert. So central is the theme of liberation to the feast, the largest Jewish revolt during the Nazi occupation of Europe began on the eve of Passover. On April 19th, 1943, Jewish insurgents ambushed Nazi police and SS auxiliary forces in the Warsaw Ghetto of Poland. Although the insurrection would soon be crushed brutally, it would remain a contemporary monument to Passover.

It's significant, then, that this coming week marks 70 years since the Nazis annexed Austria. The triumphant procession of the Fuhrer into Vienna, as part of his nearly-unopposed conquest of Eastern Europe, stands in sharp contrast to the humble entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the "City of Peace".

In 1938, Time Magazine elected Adolf Hitler as "Man of the Year", stating that in less than six years he had transformed the German spirit from one of a defeated and crushed people to the most powerful - and menacing - military machine in the world. Acknowledging that he was "applauded wildly and ecstatically by most Germans", the magazine also warned that "Hitler became in 1938 the greatest threatening force that the democratic, freedom-loving world faces". Soon, he would dominate most of Europe.

Blaming Jews for his people's past humiliation, Hitler launched a demonic campaign to exterminate anyone sharing their genetic code. And yet the Holocaust remains, not only the worst attack on the Hebrew people of God since the Romans sacked Jerusalem in AD 70 and scattered the Jews throughout the known world, but also a primary motive for the People of Israel to return to their land. Out of tragedy was reborn the State of Israel.

Ironically, the triumphant march of the Jewish people on Jerusalem in 1948 has also led to the marginalization of their Palestinian brothers and sisters who had inhabited the land since the beginning. To make the vital connections, two Palestinian Christians will be selling religious articles at

our church tonight and tomorrow, after the processions and masses. These beautifully carved olive-wood crafts help support the extremely poor and increasingly desperate Christian families of Bethlehem. With their access to Israeli territory increasingly blocked, they can no longer make a living.

Jesus was, after all, not only a Jew, but a Palestinian as well. And when he made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, he didn't head for the Roman Praetorium. Rather, he marched to the Temple, determined to liberate the House of God and the true religion of Israel from those who had enslaved God's people. The yoke of endless sacrifices, highly exaggerated prices, and manipulated weights and measures had become a crushing burden.

For this, and not for any plans to revolt, the religious authorities of Jesus' day wanted him crucified. Yes, he healed on the Sabbath and defended the unjustly accused. Yes, he scandalized the Pharisees by speaking of God as his "Father" and by claiming, in one way or another, to be the Messiah.

But what really boiled their blood was that he threatened their iron-grip of religious control and overturned the tables of their lucrative financial system. And thus they quickly persuaded a reluctant Pilate to crucify him.

Palm Sunday, then, takes the liberation theme of Passover and amplifies it to a much broader cause: the One "who comes in the name of the Lord" is here, not to inspire a political insurrection, but to deliver us all from every form of bondage and slavery. The worst slavery is that to sin, to evil, and to death – that is, slavery to Satan himself. Jesus will take on himself the sins of all humanity, lay down his arms and allow Satan to have his day.

And then Jesus will destroy the work of Satan forever. What begins as "Palm Sunday" soon becomes "Passion Sunday", and the liturgy that begins with a joyful procession moves quickly into the recitation of the wrenching account of Jesus' condemnation, cruel torture, and crucifixion. The voices that first cry out "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!" (Matthew 21:9) will later clamor for the release of a murderer, Barabbas (27:21) and, when the fate of Jesus is placed in their hands, will scream "Crucify Him!" (27:23). But Jesus will rise again.

The message of Palm Sunday is that, in spite of our unfaithfulness to God and our resistance to the true freedom He offers us in Jesus Christ, Love will prevail. He "so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son" to live and die for us (John 3:16), and what God promises will be fulfilled.

The promise of true and ultimate deliverance is ours to receive and to live. Palm Sunday initiates Holy Week, the most sacred time of the year. We'll fully celebrate our redemption on Easter if we walk this week with Christ.