

WHICH PROCESSION DO WE WANT TO BE IN?

On that first Palm Sunday, in the year 30, there were two processions entering Jerusalem. One was a peasant procession, which we know about and just heard from the Gospels; the other an imperial procession, which we know about from Roman records.

From the east, Jesus rode a donkey from the little village of Bethany down the Mount of Olives and up into the gates of the city, cheered by his followers. It was Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year, when the Jews celebrate their liberation from the Pharaoh in Egypt. Jesus and his disciples had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, where Nazareth is, about a hundred miles to the north.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered Jerusalem on a warhorse at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. They had come up to Jerusalem from Pilate's palace on the Mediterranean coast.

Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's procession proclaimed the power of empire. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe the scene of these two processions in their fascinating book *The Last Week*.

What a contrast these two processions must have presented – the Roman governor and his legions in battle dress and military precision marching in from one side; Jesus and his ragtag followers shouting and waving palm branches, arriving from the other. Jesus deliberately chose to enter the city on a donkey, intentionally enacting a passage from the prophet Zechariah, which spoke of a king of peace riding on a colt, the foal of an ass. The Palm Sunday procession of Jesus into Jerusalem was what we would call today a planned political demonstration, an appeal to the people of Jerusalem to follow the path of peace, even as the war-like power of imperial Rome marched in from the opposite direction.

We don't hear much today about Pilate's military procession, but it was a familiar occurrence in the Jewish homeland in the first century. Normally the Roman governors lived in Caesarea, on the coast about 60 miles west, but they came up to Jerusalem for the major religious festivals in case there was trouble. And trouble there often was, especially at Passover, when crowds of Jewish pilgrims poured in from all over the country to

celebrate the Exodus from Egypt, when Moses led the Jewish people from slavery to liberation. And of course the Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem hoped for liberation from the present evil empire, Rome.

The imperial procession was a visual panoply of imperial power – Pilate and his cavalry on war horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. The sounds of marching feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. It reminds me of those old movies by Leni Riefenstahl of Hitler’s Germany in the 1930s.

Pilate’s procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not only the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God. For Rome’s Jewish subjects, Pilate’s procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology. A heresy – and a blasphemy. For the Jews Yahweh was God and God alone. Caesar was not.

The inescapable irony, of course, is that today, 2000 years later, millions of people around the globe are celebrating Jesus’ Palm Sunday procession, that collection of poor and powerless peasants – and we don’t even remember the imperial procession of Rome with all its military might.

But what about the military processions across our world today? There are still imperial processions and evil rulers out there with only their own power as their intent and mission. Are they also destined to join the dust of history?

So as we walk in the way of Jesus this Holy Week, let’s make sure we’re in the right procession. Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in? Let’s not get caught up in the procession of empire and materialism, of domination and majesty and might. Let’s make sure we’re following Jesus, the one riding in on a donkey, swordless, with no troops riding along on white stallions and shining armor. Let’s make sure we’re following the Prince of Peace, who welcomes the powerless, the sick and the homeless, the stranger and the immigrant – and following him not as tourists but as pilgrims.

That’s the question for us this Palm Sunday -- which procession do we want to be in?