

Sermon 3-28-2010
Palm Sunday

Amanda K. Gott

The annual Passover celebration was a tense and volatile time in Jerusalem.

The Hebrew people remembered their amazing story

Of how their God freed them from slavery

Bringing them out of Egypt through the Red Sea.

The miraculous parting of the waters to let their people through,

Escaping from Egypt,

Out of the bondage of oppression and slavery

To FREEDOM.

This story of how God emancipated the Hebrew people,

Defeating the mightiest army in the world

as the Red sea closed in on Egypt's horses and chariots,

This Passover story of liberation was so important for the Hebrew people,

And so powerful

That it caused them to chafe even more than usual under the oppressive yoke of Roman occupation,

And Israel's longing for freedom from Rome was intensified.

The deep tensions between the Roman Empire and her Jewish subjects

Ran high and often reached the breaking point

During Passover.

In Jerusalem at this time of year,

There was always the potential for rebellion and insurrection.

Add to this that the city was over-crowded during Passover,

Filled with thousands of pilgrims from all over Judea,

Who had made the trip to Jerusalem to celebrate this holy time in the holy city,

The city was teeming with tourists,

Bursting at the seams,

and groaning under the weight of too many people crammed into too little space.

The atmosphere was highly volatile.

Jerusalem during the Passover was like a pile of dynamite,

Waiting for the smallest little spark to set it off

To cause the city to explode with violence.

The Roman authorities had learned over the years

About the dangerous situation of Passover in Jerusalem

The potential for rebellion and violence,

And they had learned that it was a sound strategy to nip any rebellion in the bud.

So it had become the habit of the Empire to deploy extra troops into Jerusalem at the time of the Passover.

They came marching into the city in a grand procession through the West Gate into Jerusalem.

It was quite an amazing procession.

All of the power and might

And wealth and glitz and glamour

Of the Roman Empire.

Strong, well-trained soldiers in their gleaming armour,

With brightly colored silk flags and banners that displayed the wealth of Rome.

And weapons – countless weapons of every sort imaginable -

All in perfect condition

And polished so brightly they flashed in the sun.

And the horses!

Oh, those gorgeous horses!

Different kinds of horses for the different tasks of war.

The massive, sturdy horses from the lands at the Northwestern fringes of the empire,

Known for their strength and toughness.

And from the Arab lands at the Southeastern edges of the huge empire,

Horses that were smaller,

But were nonetheless prized in battle for their astonishing speed and agility.

Different kinds of horses for different kinds of battle situations,

But all of them magnificent, extraordinary, and costly animals.

All of these armed troops and weapons and gear and horses processed through the West gate,

Shaking the earth and stirring up the dust as they came.

The people of Jerusalem put cloths over their faces to keep the dust out of their mouths and noses,

As they watched the procession enter the city.

It was a very intimidating display for the people of Jerusalem,

Meant to give a clear message about the power of the Roman army.

But the procession was also beguiling and oddly intoxicating in its magnificence and polished brilliance,

As are all displays of wealth and power.

But there was another procession that day, too.

Through the East gate.

A man from the countryside,

From some no-name town in the sticks,

Riding on a donkey.

A donkey!

How pathetic!

- Especially when compared to the magnificent war horses coming through the gate on the other side of the city.

This man was obviously not wealthy.

In fact, he was looking a little bit travel-worn in his dirty and bedraggled-looking tunic.

With him, he had some friends.

Sorry lot they were!

The very dregs of society – diseased people, prostitutes, lepers,

widows and beggars

people who were hurt and lame,

people who were very poor and down-and-out.

A sorry-looking bunch.

But the man on the donkey had a reputation.

He brought good news and healing and life and hope to those who needed it most.

He made those who had been outcast and rejected by all others

Feel a glimmer of light inside,

Like they mattered,

Even like they were loved, and cared for.

So the man on the donkey

And his bunch of friends and followers

Were joyously welcomed into Jerusalem by many.

People put their cloaks on the ground to make a path,

Which was a big deal,

Because most of them were poor,

And only had one coarsely-woven cloak.

They spread some palm branches to fill the holes in the path where there weren't enough cloaks to lay down,

And they waved palm branches before the man as he entered the city through the East Gate,

As if this man on the donkey were some kind of royalty.

This little procession must have seemed like a ridiculous parody,

A pathetic imitation

Of the procession from Rome.

Anyone seeing the two of them side by side would have laughed –

It was obvious that the power and the wealth and the strength lay in the hands of the Empire,

And not with this man on a donkey

and his reggedy band of outcasts and street people.

But there was a festive air of celebration in that crowd as they came into Jerusalem.

The Palms were a sign of triumph, of victory, of hope

that maybe things could be different.

The crowd that welcomed the man on the donkey cheered and cried out,

Shouting with joy,

Daring to believe that this man was The One for whom they were longing,

The one that could stand down the other procession -

The procession from Rome that was entering Jerusalem from the West - At the exact same moment.

Predictably, these two processions did clash in the city that week of the Passover.

The procession of wealth and might and power,

And the procession of hope and new life for the brokenhearted.

As the man who had entered Jerusalem on a donkey

Hung on a cross,

Dying the most disgraceful, humiliating, painful death that the Roman Empire could dish out,

A method of torture and execution intended to give a clear, public message to all people

About the might of the Roman Empire and the hopelessness of any attempt to defy her....

As Jesus hung on the cross, it seemed clear who was really triumphant.

As always, force and violence and oppression were stronger than any hope for dignity and grace.

Might and wealth and power had won, it seemed.

Why had anyone dared to believe that things could be different?

That maybe ALL people could experience love and dignity and freedom?

Where was that hope now?

Today we have the advantage of hindsight,

And we know that the Roman Empire was not triumphant,

Despite the wealth and power she had amassed and stolen.

We know that the ultimate triumph does indeed belong to Jesus Christ,

The pathetic man on the donkey,

Who hung, tortured and broken, on the cross.

We know that those who welcomed him into Jerusalem were not naïve or foolish in their hope,

And that the palm branches of victory were not waved in vain.

But Jesus Christ's triumph cannot happen without the cross.

Jesus' crucifixion is the key to the new life and hope that he brings.

The Cross is not a temporary unpleasantness

in an otherwise brilliant and illustrious career,

Christ's death is the very way to his triumph –

The way to triumph for all of us,

To new life, new hope, new freedom.

The Cross and the Resurrection are bound to one another.

Inseparable.

We cannot – CANNOT – have one without the other.

This week we are confronted with something we would rather not face.

The betrayal, the agony, the death by crucifixion,
and the hard choice we each have before us, every day.

In this holiest of weeks,

As we prepare to renew our Baptismal covenants and our Baptismal lives,

we must choose Whom or What we are going to follow.

Which procession will we be a part of?

Will we be led by that beguiling, intoxicating glitz and glamour

With which the forces of wealth and power entice us?

Or, on the other side of Jerusalem,

will we follow the procession of that pitiful man on the donkey,

with his raggedy bunch of outcasts and street people...

Follow him on the way of the Cross –

to new hope, new freedom,

and new life?