

Palm/Passion Sunday, April 2, 2023 The Roman Empire celebrated its military victories with a parade called a Triumph. The commanding general entered the city and rolled through its streets in a four-horse chariot. His troops, his soon-to-be-enslaved captives, and the spoils of war trailed behind him.

Wearing a crown of laurel and a gold-embroidered purple toga, the commanding officer was hailed as a sort of demi-god and a king-for-a-day. For that moment, he was immeasurably superior to all the ordinary slobs cheering and clapping along the parade route.

By contrast to the Imperial custom, Jesus entered through the gates of Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Not as a condescending superior, but as one of us. Matthew explains that Jesus was fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy where it is written:

"Look, your king is coming to you, / humble, and mounted on a donkey,..." (from Zechariah 9:9)

Jesus led a parade announcing that the long-awaited Kingdom of Heaven is becoming an earthly reality. And he is its humble king. He wields the power of love. And he exercises that power not by spilling an enemy's blood, but by pouring out his own. He gives his blood, his life, for the healing of the world.

Listening to the Passion narrative takes us to a solemn place.

But Jesus encourages us to be more than compassionate or grateful or guilt-ridden spectators of what he has done. He wants us to follow him. To be transformed by his Passion into participants in the mending, liberating, reconciling work of the cross and resurrection. Jesus himself told us that following him means to take up our cross. The path to the empty tomb passes through Golgotha.

Paradoxically, the way to eternal life is to live fully and completely in this world. To embrace the contradictions of this life with unflinching realism. Our world is a mixture of joy and terror. Delight and heartache. Pleasure and pain.

When Jesus stretched his arms out on the cross, he encompassed it all. He embraced the tensions and the conflicts of our existence. It is so very human to chase the delights and to flee the pain. But Jesus invites us to be in solidarity with the world's pain. This is not a command. It's a vocation. A calling we may choose to follow.

You see, Jesus knew that pain afflicts everyone and distorts our lives. Each one of us will have to deal with it in some way or another. Over the ages we humans have kept converting our pain into violence. We've either offloaded that pain onto others or turned it against ourselves in various forms of self-loathing. In either case, we have succeeded only in increasing the total pool of suffering.

Jesus offers a different way, what Richard Rohr calls a cruciform life. When the ache of the world enters my own life—when the pain of poverty, mass shootings, hunger, homelessness, racism, and homophobia haunts my own soul, breaks my own heart, wounds my own body—it transforms me.

I move from being a wounded person to what Henri Nouwen called a wounded healer. But not just my own wounds. The wounds of the world. I am propelled by love to seek justice. Not punitive justice. Restorative justice. The justice that heals and mends the very source of our pain with the power of love.

Here's how Rohr puts it, "[Christians] agree to embrace the imperfection and even the injustices of our world, allowing these situations to change [us] from the inside out, which is the only way things are changed anyway." (Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, p. 148).

Or, as we pray from our Book of Common Prayer:

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace...

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