

**THE CROWD SPEAKS TOO LOUDLY; MATTHEW 21:1-11; PALM SUNDAY,
4/9/17; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

When Jesus comes bouncing into town on the back of a donkey and the crowds cut palm branches, lay their cloaks and robes on the road he ambles upon – as if welcoming a conquering war hero – and shout “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “This is the prophet!” one commentator writes, “they use the right words but still miss the point; they have all of the notes and none of the music.”

By the end of this Holy Week when Jesus faces the crowds again and Pilate asks them what they want him to do with Jesus and the crowds shout “Crucify him! Crucify him!” they have found their voice. They sing the music of hatred and fear. But they still miss the point.

Maybe we shouldn’t be too hard on the crowds. When the discussion turns to God we assume we know who we are talking about; the common definition of God in Jesus’ day was a conquering hero; the strong, mighty warrior who will put the enemy in his place, balance the scales of justice, and make everything right at last.

The first clue, however, that this may be a case of mistaken identity is the last verse of today’s reading, “When he entered Jerusalem, *the whole city was in turmoil*, asking, ‘Who is this?’ to which the crowds respond, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’” It is an ominous identity Matthew places on the lips of the, as yet, unknowing, jubilant crowds, for *this* is the city that “stones and kills the prophets.”

Matthew’s account portends cosmic forces at work. The Greek word for ‘turmoil’ is a word used for storms, earthquakes, violent shakings of the earth, and apocalyptic events. When Jesus enters the city, it is not the ground that trembles, but the city, Matthew says, face to face with its Messiah.

And this is a second clue that maybe this Jesus is not who the crowds think he is – a Messiah but not the Messiah they expect because we are not talking about the legions of Caesar marching down the streets of Jerusalem, but Jesus meek and mild riding a gentle donkey and still the city quakes! Who is this Jesus indeed?

We’ve been asking that question ever since. Some of the Jesus books my library include: *The Meaning of Jesus, Who is Jesus?* and *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*.

This Jesus who rides into town today, hailed as a savior of his people is a king, but his kingship is of a different kind; he is victorious but his victory is of another order.

On the one hand, Matthew’s version of the entrance fulfills the prophecy that ‘your king will come to you, humble and riding upon a donkey.’ But on the other hand, the royal liturgy Matthew uses – Jerusalem’s version of a ticker tape parade for a celebrity – is not that for a humble figure but a victorious military leader. It is the absence of armor, sword and battle horse, as he enters the city that everyone seems to miss. Using a war parade to display a humble victor is not just brilliant irony, it is Matthew’s answer to the question, “Who is this?”

Here's the operating principle at work in today's story – we don't know who God is until God says who she is; we don't know what to expect until God reveals God's self.

Of course, we know God is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer; we know God is love; we know God was in Jesus; but we don't know how God will be revealed to us today.

Which has never stopped God's people from wishing, predicting, even demanding how God should manifest himself to address our current needs and the world as we know it.

The Jerusalem Jesus rides into (if not Buffalo today) is a city confronted with a decision. What will it do with a Messiah who ushers in a reign of peace, not warfare? With a prophet who cares deeply for it, as a mother hen cares for her brood?

The portrait of Jesus painted here is designed to emphasize his humble nature and the nature of those who follow him. There is no mistake the individual entering the city is "your king" who commands peace to the nations and whose dominion will reach to the ends of the earth. This is a royal scene and the king comes as the long-awaited completion of Israel's hopes.

Like a master sculptor, Matthew excises the phrase "triumphant and victorious" from the prophecy of Zechariah and refers only to the "meekness" of the king to emphasize how *this king* differs from all other kings. Identifying him as humble at the beginning of the passion story is strategic. What happens in the days ahead – mocking, betrayal, and desertion – all contribute to Jesus' humility. He resolutely lives out his vocation, his calling to be the Son of God, refusing to come down from the cross, saving others, and trusting only in God.

Philip Levine, one of America's great poets of the 20th c. has a heart for the plight of the humble poor and marginalized; from Detroit where he grew up and worked in the automobile industry to the migrant workers of California where he later lived to those who fought against fascism in the Spanish Civil War his poetry reflects the humility, yet resolution in the face of hardship, of the people he writes about.

Like Jesus, he identifies with those the world wants to forget, the workers on the graveyard shift, the women who kept and sustained house and home and the children raised in the grip of poverty. Levine depicts foundries, chemical plants, grease shops and skylines ablaze with smoke and fire.

His poetry evokes the biblical prophets, Christopher Smart – considered to be mad – whose *Jubilate Agno* we will hear this afternoon in evensong, Whitman's *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, a poem of life and death, love and loss and the wildly inventive diction of Dylan Thomas and John Berryman, plus the twists and turn of colloquial black speech. In one poem he eulogizes a pig being driven to market who staunchly refuses to squeal or break down and can already smell "the sour, grooved block/the blade that opens the hole/and the pudgy white fingers that shake out the intestines"; the pig is a stand in for the worker who refuses to give up his dignity but could also represent a humble Messiah entering the city, to face arrest, trial and execution.ⁱ

It is fitting that Jesus' kingship, which was not one of victory over foreign armies and distant lands but was the conquering of the darkness of the human heart, a victory over human despair which Kierkegaard said is the primary source of spiritual paralysis and suffering; this is a king who defeats the insistent elevation of the self above and at the expense of all others and the malevolent symptoms associated with the self-absorbed ego known as the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony that all of us have suffered from or because of....

It is fitting that this king would be distinguished by humility, kindness and meekness – the very antidotes to the aggression and ambition that drove Adam and Eve to discount God's instruction and eat the forbidden fruit.

It is the human condition the humble king on a donkey comes to save and he does so with eyes wide open in a world that worships military power, is oppressed by religious authority and beaten down by poverty, want and injustice.

Palm Sunday 2017 is no different; we witness a global refugee crisis caused by a war torn world unlike anything seen before; a world in which military strength is the ultimate security and corporate profits have escalated the private wealth and decadence of a few far beyond even that of the Gilded Age, yet average working and middle class Americans languish in a twenty year stagnation of wages and salaries.

There is much that is right with our time, and plenty to celebrate. But there are also disturbing signs of decay in systems that were designed to protect and sustain the wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Like 1st century Palestine, the 21st century is no less in need of a savior. One of the most poignant symbols of the spiritual malaise of the world today is the phenomenon among refugee children who are lucky enough to make it to safe haven in another country from certain death in their homelands but then learn their families have not been accepted for asylum. The *New Yorker* reported last week on "resignation syndrome" in which patients between the ages of 8 and 15 have no underlying physical or neurological disease but have lost the will to live. One doctor said, "Their comatose condition is a form of protection. They are like Snow White. They just fall away from the world."ⁱⁱ

It is such a world where the lives of refugees and their children are of no value; a world built of institutions, social mores and cultural expectations that feed self-importance and erode the image of God within us that Jesus comes to defeat.

Military hardware, political power, and material wealth are of little use to this king and his army; rather he comes with the weapons of righteousness and a humble heart to confront the ancient foe and forces of darkness.

Matthew says, the city trembles and shakes as he approaches – disarmed, humble, lowly and meek riding on a donkey. By Thursday an eerie calm before the chaos will descend upon an upper room; by Friday tremors will cut and run through the earth and on Sunday an unprecedented seismic event will destroy the present order and recreate the landscape of the human heart. Amen.

ⁱ “The Visionary Poetics of Philip Levine and Charles Wright,” Edward Hirsch, from *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, ed. Jay Parini and Brett C. Millier, (Columbian University Press: New York, 1993) 777ff.

ⁱⁱ Rachel Aviv, “The Apathetic,” *The New Yorker*, April 3, 2017, 68.