

SHARING A BEAUTIFUL MIND<sup>1</sup>  
Philippians 2: 5-11  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
April 17, 2011

Somewhere in my reading this week I got a hint that there was a famous entry into Jerusalem that stood in stark contrast to the entry of Jesus on Palm Sunday. So I did some research and found that in the year 1898, Kaiser Wilhelm II, the last of the Holy Roman Emperors and the dictator of Germany, did indeed make a six-day visit to Jerusalem with all the pageantry and splendor that could be mustered. He was so intent that his entry be full of royal splendor that he insisted that the Jaffa Gate be widened to allow his over-sized royal carriage enough room to enter.

So he refused to enter the Old City until the widening of the gate was complete, and when he finally led the parade of dignitaries and soldiers into Jerusalem through the widened Jaffa Gate, riding in his magnificent German coach, someone climbed up and attached a large sign above the gate. The sign read: "A better man than Wilhelm came through this city's gate. He rode on a donkey."

---

<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, April 13, 2011.

## I

Today we celebrate that better man, the one who entered Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. It was an exciting day; in fact, the writer of the gospel of Matthew was so excited in writing about it that he implies that Jesus rode two animals at once! *...they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.*<sup>2</sup> Such exuberance only endears us more to this gospel.

He entered the city, not on a warhorse, but on a donkey, a symbol of humility. And the people *spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.*<sup>3</sup> This was a first-century version of the red carpet treatment.

Of course we read the story with a broken heart, for we know what lies ahead. We know that the crowd is fickle and will turn on him. We know about the agony of the garden, the betrayal of Judas, the trial and the crucifixion. We know what they do not yet know.

The central word in the story is “Hosanna.” It has a light, airy sound. It sings well! Matthew tells us that the crowds went both ahead of him and behind him shouting that word. *Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*<sup>4</sup> What exactly does that mean? We sing it as a

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 21: 7.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 21: 8.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 21: 9.

word of praise, but it literally is a massive cry for help. It means “Save now!” Don’t delay; save us now!

Here were massive numbers of Jewish pilgrims, fed up with the nightmare of Roman occupation, fed up with being jerked around by puppet rulers like Pilot, fed up the rudeness of the Roman soldiers who had no respect for their religion. “Hosanna!” they shouted, and everyone knew what it meant. But just to make sure there was no mistaking what political implications were involved, they added one more line: *Hosanna to the Son of David!* King David was remembered as a great military leader who overthrew every enemy and gave Israel their independence. By identifying Jesus as a “Son of David” the crowds were asking for a revolution to be led by none other than this man riding on a donkey. And what’s more, they wanted it now. “Hosanna”—save now! None of this sweet by-and-by business; we want it now!

This understanding helps us make sense of two key parts of the Holy Week story. The first is the action of Pilot. In offering freedom to a revolutionary prisoner named Barabbas, he was appeasing the revolutionaries. The second is the disappointment of the disciples, and especially Judas, because Jesus refused to lead the kind of revolution they wanted. Jesus had a different mind about revolution!

That would also explain the perplexity of the disciples at the Last Supper when Jesus spoke of his own shed blood rather than Pilot's shed blood, which of course is what many of them wanted. His words that night: *...my body, given for you...my blood, shed for you...*, strike a deep chord within us, for we know that his kind of revolution is deeper than the revolution of politics that comes at the ballot box, and deeper than the revolution of violence that comes with the military. His revolution has to do with the heart and the mind.

## II

Years later, as the Apostle Paul was thinking through the events of Holy Week, he wrote a letter to one of his favorite churches. It was a short letter that we know as Philippians (only four chapters in our Bible), and he was filled with gratitude for the genuine, gifted, and sincere members of that church. But as wonderful as that church was, it was having a problem with a few of its members who wanted to lord it over others. They were like Kaiser Wilhelm II, who wanted the royal treatment.

To them, he said, *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who...emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.*<sup>5</sup> The same mind, a beautiful mind, a mind that we can share with Christ. Let the same mind be in you that refused to enter Jerusalem in royal splendor, but instead chose a donkey, a

---

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2: 5-7.

symbol of humility. Let the same mind be in you that trusted God in spite of the betrayal and desertion of his closest friends, the agony of his trial and scourging, the humiliation and cruelty of the cross. Let that mind be in you, he said.

Let this mind be in you, that even when you are facing the greatest challenges of your life, strength can still be found in weakness, goodness can be found in choosing to serve others, and life can be found where we thought there was only death. *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*, for God is at work in you!

### III

With Palm Sunday, we all enter Holy Week. We can enter in the fancy carriage of arrogance: my ideas are better than yours...my religion is better than yours...my denomination is better than yours...my traditions are better than yours.... We can ride into Holy Week with all the splendor of arrogance.

Or we can enter this week as Christ did: with feet dangling awkwardly over the sides of a donkey, with love for all God's children, and with courage based on the reality that God is with us.