

Pax Romana, Pax Eterna

a sermon for Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022

Rev. Scott Dalgarno based on Luke 19:28-40

Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in what would come to be called the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. One was a peasant procession, the other was an imperial procession.

From east of the city, Jesus came in, riding a donkey, cheered on by those friendly to itinerants like him. He and his followers had come on foot to Jerusalem from Galilee where Jesus had been born and grew up. Galilee was located about 100 miles to the north so they had been walking for several days.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west came Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idu-mea, Judea, and Samaria. He would have likely entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. So, these were both festive parades, but they could not have been more different.

Jesus's procession proclaimed the reign of God. Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. Fact is, the two processions embodied the central conflicts of the week that will lead to Jesus' crucifixion.

Here is how that played out. It was standard practice for the Roman governor to be in Jerusalem during festival occasions, not out of reverence for religious devotion, but in case of trouble. This was especially true in case of Passover.

I mean, Passover was a festival that celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire -- Egypt, during the time of Moses.

The mission of the troops under Pilate, was to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed at the Fortress Antonia, overlooking the Jewish temple and marble courts in Jerusalem. But Pilate wasn't often in the city.

He lived in Caesarea, a splendid new city, sixty miles away, right on the Mediterranean coast. It was easily defended and smelled pleasantly of the sea.

So, this would be like our governor, coming into Salem from bucolic Cannon Beach with a huge police escort.

Imagine Pilate's imperial procession arriving in downtown Jerusalem. It was visually stunning, complete with cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, fancy helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles.

The sounds were equally remarkable. It included the sound of marching feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums.

Everyone could feel the sound of the emperor's power going right through their bodies. But Pilate's entry was about more than imperial power, it was also about imperial theology.

According to Roman thinking, the emperor was not only the ruler of Rome, he was also the Son of God. That's what he was called. Former emperor Augustus was said to be the offspring of Apollo.

Yes, and the emperor was not only Son of God, inscriptions refer to him also as "savior," "lord," and guarantor of "peace on earth."

Of course, these are all familiar terms to Christians. Which means that our sacred Christian terminology, borrowed as it was, is, by nature, seditious. It is meant to call into question everything Rome says about itself to stay in power.

Peace on earth. The Romans are remembered to have called this *Pax Romana*. Roman peace. But what that peace amounted to was really just the heels of Roman military boots on the necks of the peasantry.

I'm afraid it's very like white supremacist legislators all over this country passing draconian bills to keep black people from voting and calling it, "election integrity" when everyone knows it's just Jim Crow legislation.

Just appalling.

Well, Augustus and his successors faced a problem making "peace" an acceptable mode of life for the Romans. I mean, they had been at war with one power or another continuously for more than 200 years.

Romans regarded peace not just as an absence of war. For Rome, peace only existed when all opponents had been beaten down so hard and so far that they had lost any ability or will to resist. Which, of course, is the model Putin is using now in Ukraine.

Augustus issued coins with his likeness on one side and the word, *Pax* on the reverse. But Rome's appeal for "peace" was only propaganda, and people generally knew it. Jesus certainly did.

Jesus doesn't recognize the emperor's peace as peace at all. When coming over the ridge and first spying Jerusalem that morning, off in the distance, he is quoted as saying ...

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, O that you knew the things that make for peace, but they are hidden from your eyes."

Now, I need to add that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at the same time as Pilate's entry is no coincidence. Jesus's entry on a donkey is an intentional counter-procession. Jesus planned it in advance.

His followers lay down palm branches and their garments on the road as he comes down from the Mount of Olives on a colt, the foal of a donkey. They do this because he is the kind of king peasants can gladly get behind; one without weapons, trappings of office, or war-horses.

They know that Pilate's procession is meant to make them very afraid, with its rattle of weapons and intimidation.

Jesus' procession embodies an alternative vision. The reign of God (not the kingdom of Caesar).

The reign of God. Several times in the gospels Jesus asks the question, "What is the kingdom of God?"

Answering his own question, he speaks of, among other things, mustard seeds – seeds that are tiny, but which grow into huge bushes.

When speaking of the kingdom of God, Jesus is obsessed with the idea of it being hidden; he speaks of the kingdom of God being like a seed hidden in the ground, grain hidden in the ear, yeast hidden in the dough, a treasure hidden in a field, a pearl hidden in a shop, a net hidden in the depths of the sea.

Then, thinking of the welcoming nature of God, he mentions a table laid out with a great surplus of food, in which few if any are not welcome.

But on Palm Sunday he demonstrates that he himself is the bearer of this hidden kingdom.

That is to say, he is a king, unlike Caesar. He has none of the values of an empire. None. But he knows the world is dying as a result of Caesar's oppression; dying for lack of the grace of God.

Gandhi once said, "We need to be the change we wish to see in the world." Well, this is what Jesus enacts on Palm Sunday.

The peace Jesus talked about was not one in which common folk felt beaten down and second rate. No; when he speaks of peace he says, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world gives, give I unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

Pilate, like Putin, is all about people being made to feel afraid.

Yes, and Jesus died as a direct result of the Pax Romana.

Let me tell you how it happened. In Jesus' day, Rome was a large empire. But its large size actually underscored its weakness, not its power.

Why? Because being a large empire, Rome was spread very thin. They had only so many soldiers. And they had to ration them out around the empire.

So, when it came to ruling the land they called, Palestine, they could only control the capitol city, Jerusalem.

Consequently, Jesus, who lived several days walk from Jerusalem carried out his ministry, speaking as he did of the kingdom of God in the countryside, with nearly complete impunity.

Rome wouldn't touch him, up in the region of the Galilee where he spent his whole life. Rome didn't care what he said there, in fact.

Rome ignored most everything outside Jerusalem, but not within. They were a minority in Jerusalem too, but the small force there was well armed and wielded an iron fist.

Yes, and the time of year the Roman presence in Jerusalem became feverish, due to its extreme minority status, was during the festival of the Passover. At that time the city was crowded with thousands of peasants.

At such times Pontius Pilate, became quite anxious.

He knew very well that thousands of Palestinian peasants armed with clubs and a few knives, could overwhelm his Roman guard. Think of the recent storming of our Capitol on January 6 by a misguided mob.

So, any disturbance within the walls of the city was dealt with quickly and fiercely. No matter how minor.

Rome would stand for no nonsense. Someone going into the temple and raising the least ruckus quickly became an example to the rest. That's why those who were arrested were hoisted up on crosses, not executed summarily indoors.

Rome wanted to say, “Look at this man’s agony. You could be next. NO, you WILL be next, if you step out of line.” They had little power beyond terror, but they used that expertly.

Jesus knew this, but he could not help himself. He saw the incredible business the elites were doing within the temple grounds and it made him crazy.

Instead of the Temple being the great leveling place where Jewish peasants and Jewish kings could rub shoulders under one God, it had become a place where the 1% made a killing.

We can be sure that that was what he was so angry about because it was the tables of the 1% he threw over there in the temple grounds.

Yes, and that made him Exhibit A when it came to finding an example to put on a cross to frighten the populace during Passover. Simple as that.

You know, the Bible, at its heart, is about God’s passion for his creatures to make this a different kind of world, a world in which all people have enough. Not a lot. Enough.

And this will come to the poor, not as a result of charity. Early Roman emperors gave its citizens free bread every day as a way of pacifying them.

The Bible speaks instead of justice. The idea of justice has to do with human beings valuing people’s work, not welfare. As such, it’s a wonderful thing to see labor unions on the rise again today.

Maybe this movement can help re-create a society where people can work and be respected and not feel impoverished in their wallets or their hearts.

Evangelical preachers are railing against the trend, but that only means unions must be a good thing, right?

We need a society that honors those who don't choose to go to a four year college; one that honors all work and advocates for that work to be valued at a level that doesn't leave the children of working people hungry and without basic medical support, and a decent education that begins as early as it needs to.

This seems to me to be something we all should agree on in this country. I mean, it is at the absolute heart of the gospel of Jesus.

The kingdom of God, as Jesus imagines it, is a place where we all agree that when one of us goes down, we all go down. And when the least of us rises in the world, we all rise.

That's hard for some people to get. It's nearly impossible for most Christians to get, but it is at the heart of everything Jesus ever said or did, and I think most people who actually study the gospels for any time at all and find themselves looking at Jesus, eye to eye, come to see that.

I'm excited that progressive Christianity seems now to be on the rise. So much of Evangelical Christianity has shown itself in the last few years to be mostly counterfeit, and as a result some sectors of it are crumbling like our bridges.

We all know that since the 1980s, the most visible Christians have been conservative evangelicals who often emphasize issues that Jesus never explicitly mentioned such as abortion and homosexuality. But now many ex-evangelical Christians are joining progressive Christian churches.

Jerushah Duford, a granddaughter of the Rev. Billy Graham celebrates this.

In denominations that once respected her father's openness, she says, "we have seen homophobia, hostility toward women's rights, xenophobia and lack of concern for the poor." She compares the damage right-wing Christian extremists have done to Christianity with the harm Muslim extremists have brought to Islam.

“My hope,” she says, “is that we move into a season where Jesus’s followers are no longer seen as synonymous with hate, exclusion and hypocrisy, but as beacons of love and grace.” She said this, noting that her famous grandfather, Billy Graham, focused on a message about God’s love.

These are wonderful times for Christians in churches like ours. On this celebration day there is reason to hope that the best days of Southminster lay ahead, not behind us.

Amen