

The Peace of the Lord always be with you! (And also with you). Did you think I forgot a whole part of the service? I haven't. Where do you suppose our greeting and response comes from? It traces its roots back to this very day, and Luke captures its essence in this Gospel passage, with our closing verses, itself a reference to Psalm 118 - *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!* As we begin Holy Week, we begin to experience a contrast - the peace of the world versus the peace of Christ.

To fully understand this contrast, we need to understand and experience for ourselves what was happening that week in first century Jerusalem. The setting is important. In the Hebrew Scripture there is the reality of Jerusalem the earthly city and center of Jewish religious life, it is the location of the Temple - a place where God dwells. There is also an idealized Jerusalem, called Zion - a "heavenly" city, where God's people fully live into the covenant with God: to love God and to love neighbor. Jerusalem is the place where heaven and earth meet.

Then, there is the occasion in which Jesus enters Jerusalem. He's going there for the Passover festival. Now, someone recall for me the

Passover story ... Anyone? That's right, Passover is the commemoration of Moses freeing the Israelites from slavery and oppression under Pharaoh, and the miracles God brought about when they were wandering in the wilderness.

In the first century, Rome was the occupying power in Palestine, over much of the Middle East and Europe. Many, if not most Jews, despised the occupying power because Pax Romana, or the peace of Rome was achieved by brutal repression and force. So if you were the occupying power, and a segment of your population was about to celebrate a holiday where those enslaved by the powerful were set free, how might you react if you were the occupying power? Not well, right?

Rome's local seat of power was in Cesarea Maritima, a place located on the Mediterranean coast, north of Jerusalem; if my memory serves, it is at least 50 miles away. It was here that the local Roman prelate, a certain Pontius Pilate had his residence. It was here that the arts were located, theatres, sports pavilions and the like. It was a comfortable, beautiful place compared to provincial Jerusalem. Never-the-less, because Passover had the potential to instigate violence, Imperial might had to be present in order to preserve the celebrated Pax Romana. So, just

before the Passover festival begins, a Roman legion sets out for Jerusalem along with the Roman Prelate, Pontius Pilate. Picture it, a big parade with foot soldiers carrying their weapons, officers riding on horse back or on a chariot. Wave after wave, column after column, showing the might of Imperial power - if violence breaks out, Rome will brutally stomp it out, preserving the peace.

Jesus had to have been aware of the charged atmosphere into which he was entering. It is clear that his own parade was carefully thought out. He had already made arrangements for a colt to be at the ready, thus fulfilling a prophecy of Zechariah "your king comes to you riding on a donkey." Jesus gathered his multitude of disciples together and he makes a grand entrance into the city of Jerusalem.

In the background, they might have heard the roll of the chariots, the clapping of hooves, the steady footfalls of the Roman soldiers, the drum beats helping them keep time, the clapping of the crowd. Think about any Memorial Day, or Independence Day or Veterans Day parade you've attended and you'll have a sense of what that parade was like. What a contrast this must have been to the peasant parade with a lone man riding on a colt, cloaks laid on the ground muffling the sound of the little donkey's

hoof beats. Yet here the disciples began praising God joyfully giving voice to all the deeds of power they had seen Jesus perform. The two parades must not have intersected, one seemingly insignificant compared to the other. Yet to the Jewish leadership, it must have been discomfiting. Here were Jews coming into Jerusalem, they were shouting, they were giving Jesus the same names that the Romans used for the Emperor - including "prince of peace." Rome had a reputation for "shoot first, ask questions later" and the Pharisees must have been deeply troubled.

Jesus, they may have yelled over the din, keep the noise down, tell your disciples to cool it! And Jesus, perhaps with a big smile on his face, reminds them of the prophet Habakkuk - the stones themselves will shout out. In other words, God will continue to raise up disciples even if these disciples are silenced. And sure enough, God has - for here we are, aren't we?

Jesus was fully prepared to speak truth to power: that God is owed our allegiance and no one else. God's peace is the only peace worth having. As God's people, our requirements are to love God and to love another other. This type of peace is the peace expressed in the Beatitudes. It is a peace where, St. Paul says in today's reading, we empty ourselves

and place the needs of others in the forefront of our minds and actions.

This does not mean we become doormats and forget our own needs or deny what we need. No. Rather, it means that we don't get our needs met at the expense of others. It demands our attention and our awareness.

This peace is costly, costly to point of death on a cross. It is a peace that goes beyond our capacity to understand it. Make no mistake, Jesus' message was as political as it was anything else. And we know that the story takes a tragic turn.

If you come to church regularly, or you read the Scriptures regularly, you are fully aware of the story line. The worship opportunities this week are offered in such a way that you are able to fully experience the Gospel story rather than just recalling it in your mind. By journeying with Jesus to the cross and experiencing his death and suffering - even by weeping at the treachery he endured, our joy will be enhanced in our celebration of Easter. In the process our own formation as Christian disciples will be enhanced. Have you ever been very ill? Maybe with the flu? And it wasn't until you recovered that you realized how sick you had been? Or that now health has been restored, how much you appreciate being in good health?

In the same way, attending the Holy Week services will bring greater appreciation to the gift of the resurrection at Easter.

The crowd that joyfully cheered Jesus into the city of Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday was a far different crowd than the one that yelled "crucify him" days later. Those Palm Sunday disciples dispersed when the inevitable clash occurred resulting in Jesus' arrest. That left just those Jews who were fearful of civil power, incited to yell "crucify him!" What kind of disciples will we be in our own day? Will we too disperse at the first sign of trouble? Or will we be witnesses to the peace that Christ brings, even if it is costly to us?

I note that it is no coincidence that our House of Bishops on the eve of Holy Week, are speaking unanimously and with one voice expressing concern about the tenor of our political discourse and the violence that is coming with it. They see that as a nation we are making a 'false idol out of power and privilege' and pray for a spirit of reconciliation. Their word to the Church is in the spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, where good people must not keep silent. Our Bishops make plain that in our Lord's resurrection, Christ revealed the injustice done to him and unmasked the lie that might makes right. The peace of Christ will prevail over the illusory peace that any

empire, including our own, brings. As we fully enter Holy Week, I invite you to seek the peace of Christ, the peace which passes all understanding.

AMEN.