

MYSTICS and SKEPTICS

Palm Sunday and the Mission of Christ

By Rev. Charles Brock

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For me, Palm Sunday is a great festival. Not only do I love the full-blown liturgy with trumpets, processions, palm waving, the powerful hymns, but also the historical meanings and the theology behind them. It is gutsy!

The earliest account is in the Gospel of Mark 11, written around 70 AD. “So, they [the disciples] brought the colt to Jesus, and when they had spread their cloaks on it, he mounted it. Many people carpeted the road with their cloaks, while others spread greenery they had cut in the fields, and those in front and those behind shouted, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David which is coming! Hosanna in the heavens! *(Revised English Bible 1989, used for all biblical quotes in this article)*”

Let’s use this information for starters. It is deep with meaning. Why a colt? Why greenery? Why the mention of the kingdom of David, who ruled Israel a long time before Jesus and was king at the height of its power?

Most of the New Testament is built on the so-called Old Testament or, better, the Hebrew Scriptures. The text most referred to is Zechariah 9.9. “Daughter of Zion, rejoice with all your heart; shout in triumph, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king is coming to you, his cause won, his victory gained, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” You get a lot of sermons on the humility of Jesus, and that he was, but that misses the greater point.

Zechariah 9.9 is usually the Hebrew Scriptures text read out in church on Palm Sunday. The next verse one hardly ever hears, but for me is the heart of the story. What will then happen? They are welcoming both a religious and political king – king, not a prophet or a priest. And he has the power to change the political shape of the region.[1]

“He will banish the chariot from Ephraim, the war horse from Jerusalem. The warrior’s bow will be banished, and he will proclaim peace (shalom equals lack of conflict, health, wealth, victory in the numerous meanings in the original Hebrew)

to the nations (not just Israel). His rule will extend from sea to sea, from the River [Euphrates] to the ends of the Earth.”

That is a huge hope, one that has been with Israel since Zechariah and all the prophets. It never quite came to be, but the kingdom of David in Israel created its largest territory. That is what Israel has always wanted.

It sure looks like that is what Matthew, Mark, and Luke were implying. John is the outlier, but he does bring it up. Rome would be defeated, and Israel and the kingdom of David would be restored by Jesus.

How do we know this? We have some rich sources and can go back to the words attributed to Mary and John the Baptist’s father and to the first account of the mission of Jesus in Mark and elsewhere.

Before the birth of Jesus, Mary sang: “My soul, tell out the greatness of the Lord; my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. ... He has routed the proud and all their schemes; he has brought down monarchs from their thrones and raised on high the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has come to the help of Israel his servant, as he promised to our forefathers, to Abraham and his children’s children forever.” (*Luke 1 is called the Magnificat in most liturgies and sung every day in Anglican cathedrals*).

That is about as revolutionary as you can get – religious, political, economic, and the interpretation of history. Some people say, “No, no, this is metaphorical. It refers to heaven, not Earth.” Well, that is not taking the Bible seriously. Yes, you can have biblical interpretation on several levels – historical, symbolical, mystical, or just poetic – but we must look at the texts in their contexts first. There was the overriding fact that Rome had invaded and occupied Israel’s hard-earned territory that was promised to it by God. Any good Jew would try to revolt, as indeed throughout all time people have when unjustly invaded. People want their land back. Look at Ukraine today. Look at Palestine, too. There have always been collaborationists with the enemy or occupier, but Jesus was not one of them. He loved Romans but did not join them. The Holy Land was for Jews and followers of Jesus, not the invaders with their unjust and alien ways.

Here is part of what Zechariah, not the prophet, had to say about the birth of his son John, who was the cousin of Jesus: “Praise to the Lord, the God of Israel! For he has turned to his people and set them free. He has raised for us a strong deliverer from the house of his servant David[2]... that he would deliver us from our enemies, out of the hands of those who hate us ... to rescue us from enemy hands and set us free from fear. ... You, my child, will be called Prophet of the Most High, for you will be the Lord’s forerunner, to prepare his way. (*Luke 1*)

After Jesus received baptism by John in the Jordan[3], he went to Galilee, a revolutionary part of Israel, and proclaimed, “The time has arrived; the kingdom of God is upon you. Repent, and believe the gospel (good news).” (*Mark 1*)

In my opinion this meant that the kingdom of God, not Caesar’s, was to begin with Jesus, but first repentance was needed. All religions insist on repentance before forgiveness. For Jews to regain their independence they must return to the Ten Commandments and the Mosaic Covenant, which they had forsaken. Jesus spent most of his time with the Jews trying to convince them of this, with mixed results. He used healing miracles, teachings, parables, examples, and finally the Cross, to try to convince them. (The Cross was used by the Romans to kill

insurrectionists, not “thieves” – badly translated, and the other two crucified with Jesus should also be called revolutionaries). There was not enough repentance by the people, so God did not deliver Israel from Rome. That was the condition John and Jesus demanded, and it didn’t happen. By the way, that was the normal call and response of the prophets when the Jews were under their many occupations by foreign powers – sincerely repent and change your ways back to Moses, and then God frees you.

This is not the normal interpretation of the Church through the ages. Most of the theological thrust since Paul has been on the forgiveness of sins, favoring the Aaronic side of the Moses/Aaron/Miriam equation [*cf. Micah 6.4*]. But let’s not forget the deliverance and lawgiving of Moses or the strong role of women in the Hebrew Scriptures, which the Passover and all Sabbath services include as their main focus.

The church has largely ignored the political liberation theology of Jesus and the central role of women, **but it is time they repented of this**. And sing that greatest Palm Sunday hymn by Theodulf, Bishop of Orléans (9th century):

All glory, laud, and honor to you, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring
You are the King of Israel and David’s royal Son
now in the Lord’s name coming, the King and Blessed One.

Can these views be reconciled? Of course – not a problem. It isn’t *either/or*, but *both/and*. Jesus tried to free the Jews from Rome but demands repentance as the key action needed. Jesus was not raising an army; God would do it in his old-fashioned way of plagues, disease, miracles. He was crucified by the Romans, not the Jews (though some of them had a hand in it, namely the High Priest and associates), as an insurrectionist,^[4] and the later biblical writers and Christian theologians used this as *the* example of God’s love and the forgiveness of sins, which Jesus took on himself for not only the Jews but for the whole world.

Palm Sunday shows the richness and depths of the biblical texts for then and now. There is much to ponder here, to reassess, and to reform oneself and the church. Hey, get your prayers sorted out. Good luck!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and as Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is also acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pennsylvania. He is a founding member of the Jefferson Education Society, where he serves as the secretary of the Board of Trustees.



End Notes

1. What happened to the palm branches in these accounts? Later traditions assumed them as they represented what one laid out for the coming of the Messiah. Palm branches were considered symbols of victory and triumph at the time.
 2. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, “the city of David,” and his ancestry is traced back to David. [*cf. Matthew 1*]
 3. Close to the site of Joshua’s crossing of the Jordan on dry land, an account like the crossing of the Red Sea by Moses, and then conquering Canaan. I remember trying to get there in 1983. There was a wire fence around the site, and when I tried to get through a Jewish soldier ran up and pointed a gun at my stomach and yelled at me in modern Hebrew or Yiddish, I couldn’t tell. I guess he meant “get lost” and that is what I did.
 4. Jews were often called “Christ Killers” in Europe and America but that was prejudicial and wrong. It was due to the Romans’ fear of an insurrection, and finally they destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD because of Jewish fighting. There were other “Jesuses” that tried to get rid of Rome, all unsuccessfully.
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