

Palm/Passion Sunday (Luke 19:28-40, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 23:1-49)

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by [Benjamin M. Stewart](#) in the [March 20, 2013](#) issue

Some preachers complain about the Palm Sunday lectionary, which puts together the “palm” and the “passion” Gospel texts. One complaint relates to dissonance: it's not easy to pair a celebratory parade with a trial and execution. Another complaint concerns scope: there is too much theological ground to cover and too much liturgical time required.

If the service seems crowded and discordant, there's a historical reason for it: the lectionary readings are a combination of two different local liturgies. The procession with palms comes from the church in Jerusalem, which has reenacted Jesus' entry into the city with a full liturgical parade since at least the fourth century. The emphasis on the extended synoptic passion comes from the church in Rome, where the narrative has often been sung in three voices as the primary Gospel text on this day. The two traditions cross-pollinated and merged over the fourth through the eighth centuries. Thirteen centuries later we may still experience the dual influences on this liturgy as relatively unhomogenized. But the unresolved tensions have also proved to be theologically generative.

Many preachers point out that the crowds that praised Jesus' entry into Jerusalem soon began lobbying angrily for his execution. The liturgy serves as an example of the transience of their as well as our own faith. With palm branches of hope still in our hands, we give up on the messianic vision, go back to business as usual and settle for Barabbas. It's not only that our faith's hopes wither away; sometimes we actively dismantle them. This interpretation emphasizes the dissonance within us: we who praise and follow Christ also abandon, betray, condemn and demonize Christ.

A less common observation is the dissonance this day ascribes to the divine. The text from Philippians distills the tension into what may be an early Christian creed or hymn. Christ Jesus, Paul writes, is in both the form of God and the form of a slave. It is in reverence for this apparent contradiction that everything “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” may find common purpose, culminating in what Paul envisions as a sort of cosmic liturgy in which everything everywhere bows before the mystery.

A recently composed hymn reads like a contemporary variation on the Christ hymn from Philippians. In Susan Briehl’s “Holy God, Holy and Glorious,” each stanza broadens into one of the unexpected dimensions of the holiness encountered in Jesus Christ. The third stanza draws on imagery of Isaiah’s suffering servant (part of which is read on this day): “You are despised, rejected; / Scorned, you hold us fast, / And we behold your beauty.”

The hymn invites us into a mysticism that keeps the contradictions taut. We praise the power of God by singing “you bend to us in weakness; / emptied, you draw near, / and we behold your power.” Another stanza praises God’s wisdom. By the end of the hymn we have beheld God’s glory, power, beauty, wisdom and life as they are incarnated in the one who lives and rides triumphantly toward what seems to be utter defeat and the cross.

Like the other Gospels, Luke includes the doubly ironic detail of Jesus being dressed in royal clothing as he is held and tortured. The hearers of the Gospels, however, perceive an irony the soldiers cannot see: the one mocked in the form of the slave is of a royalty greater and stranger than the soldiers can imagine. In the crucifixion narrative, all four Gospels encourage their hearers to perceive in the violent exercise of political power a hidden story of that power’s great failure and eventual undoing. Luke is in agreement with the other three Gospels: the merciful one is the mighty one. The one without the weapons holds the true power, and the one in the form of a slave is God. But only Luke, perhaps as a form of theologically charged gallows humor, records the absurdly dissonant line spoken by one condemned and dying man to another: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

A classic hymn sung on Palm Sunday is Theodulf of Orléans’s ninth-century poem “All Glory, Laud and Honor.” The text has little of the dissonance that marks the Christ hymn of Philippians or the suffering servant texts of Isaiah. Here children laud the advent of Christ and sing in praise of the Good King entering the holy city. (Gail

Ramshaw recently quoted a little-used verse that generates a dissonance at the intersection of piety and comedy. Its literal translation is “We plead with Christ to ride on us, for we are only the ass walking into the holy city.”)

On Palm Sunday Christians around the world will sing Theodulf’s ancient hymn to Christ. They will welcome him with palms (or willow, olive or pine branches). Our liturgies today parade into a fertile theological tension: both Jerusalem and every local place are the holy city where Christ comes to establish his unlikely reign.

One final dissonance marks this hymn. Theodulf apparently composed this hymn to Christ the liberating king from a prison cell as he heard the Palm Sunday procession passing by. While some traditions suggest that he was released because his hymn was so well loved, it appears more likely that he died in prison, perhaps from poisoning. So the hymn we sing to the one who sets us free in some sense originates from a prison cell. With Archbishop Oscar Romero, martyred on this day in 1980, and with all those bound in prison, including ourselves in our own many captivities, we sing to the one who comes among us “to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.”