

Palms, Passion, preachers—and pipes (Matthew 21:1-11; 26:14-27:66)

There is something about the wail of a bagpipe that seems especially appropriate this Sunday.

by [Brian Maas](#)

March 31, 2023

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

I've been blessed to serve three outstanding congregational calls, and I've gained greatly from each of them.

In one of those calls, I inherited a Palm/Passion Sunday tradition of a procession of palms and pipes. The pipes were bagpipes, as odd as that may sound at the start of Holy Week. Yet I quickly fell in love with the practice and took it with me to my next congregational call.

There is something about the wail of a bagpipe that just seems especially appropriate to the nexus of experiences and meanings that takes place on Palm/Passion Sunday. Leading off the procession of the palms as it always did, the bagpipe filled its role as a festive instrument, one of celebration, like those common in so many parades. It called to mind the joy and dynamism of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the festive shouts of hosanna.

At the same time, the bagpipe is a martial instrument, with a long history of being present in battle. The steady march of the piper to the tunes being played was a reminder that many have marched to conflict, suffering, and death to the call of the pipes. In that vein, the pipes' tones foreshadow the Thursday/Friday conflict already threatened in Jesus' chaotic and messianic entry on Sunday. "The whole city was in turmoil," says Matthew, and few instruments can convey a sense of turmoil like a

bagpipe can.

Finally, the mournful wail of the bagpipe, so often present at memorial service or graveside, sings the counterpoint to the day's celebration and energy. Whether the congregation hears only the Palm Sunday Gospel reading or also reads the whole of the Passion, there's no escaping the Good Friday culmination of the drama. No matter how festive the hosannas and waving palms, there is a somber element to the day, and the pipes make the awareness of that inescapable.

The piper bears an instrument ideal for the day and its colliding narratives and competing themes. No matter what they play, some will hear celebration, some militancy, some somberness. Whatever the notes, the meaning belongs not to the piper but to those who hear them.

The preacher too is an instrument of proclamation on Palm/Passion Sunday, and needs to be given permission—encouragement—not to try to address all that's happening as Holy Week commences. It is enough to speak the truth, to repeat the stories of the day, and to let each listener hear what they need for the moment. In merely proclaiming (not explaining or reconciling) the triumph and the threat, the nobility and the betrayal, the preacher will make it possible for each listener to hear what they need of the Gospel—be it the hope of a coming king, the acknowledgement of a prophet in conflict with injustice, or the empathic compassion of a suffering servant.

There's no toning down or quieting the bagpipe; there is simply playing it. So too on this day of festivity and foreshadowing: there is no reconciling it, no explaining it, only proclaiming it in all its chaotic glory.