

## “Truth and Consequences”

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Philippians 2:5-11 + Matthew 21:1-11 = triumphal entrance of Jesus

**O**n April 4, 1865, Abraham Lincoln entered Richmond VA, exactly 152 years ago last Tuesday. Just two days after the capital city of the South had been evacuated, Lincoln’s entrance was without fanfare, comparable to Jesus’ understated entrance into Jerusalem. He came via a ship in the harbor and took off without an escort. A small unit of marines was dispatched, but they had a hard time keeping up or even finding him.



Alighting from the ship and headed into the city, a former slave recognized Lincoln. Word spread among the community unbelievably fast, much faster even than in our day of Twitter, driven by heart more than by electricity. Soon there was a great and growing crowd of blacks and poor whites shouting “Glory, hallelujah.”

According to an eyewitness: “They all wanted to shake hands with Mr. Lincoln or his coat tail or even to kneel down and kiss his boots! ... [He came not as a conquer, but] came instead as a peacemaker, his hand extended to all who desired to take it.”

And just as in Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem, this momentous event elicits opposite reactions: ecstatic jubilation among some and intense anxiety, anger, even violence among others. Within a handful of days, Lincoln was dead from an assassin’s bullet.

**O**n the day Jesus entered Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago, the day we commemorate as Palm Sunday, there were actually two processions, count them, two.



The first was the entrance procession of Pontius Pilate, the brutal Roman governor, widely known as “the butcher of Judea” for a genocidal attack on unarmed Samaritan pilgrims. Every year Pilate would make a preemptive show of force ahead of the

Passover. Pilate was pathologically paranoid about a possible Jewish rebellion.

He rode up to Jerusalem from his headquarters in Caesarea with the vast bulk of his cavalry and troops numbering well over 2,000. Pilate entered from the West in an overblown show of imperial power.

**I**n stark contrast to Pilate's procession earlier that day, Jesus entered from the East. Jesus came not on a war horse, but on a diminutive draft animal; not at the head of a great military entourage, but all by himself; not with an over-the-top display of the arrogance of power, but humble and lowly. None of this is accidental. It's all according to plan. Competing processions, competing parades, competing kinds of rulers, competing realms.



In the Jesus procession, the crowd waves palms and spreads their cloaks on the road. They greet Jesus as the true emperor, not cowering in fear like at Pilate's entrance. They hail Jesus as the legitimate, God-chosen king of Israel, not like that propped up puppet, Herod Antipas.

The air is filled with shouts of "Hosanna." 'Hosanna' means for us little more than a form of praise ~ a sort-of "sacred hurrah" or a "praise the LORD," but it actually is a cry for help. The word literally translates as "save us."

What the crowds are saying is: "LORD and King, deliver us." Individuals are actually crying out "Hosanna, please rescue me from this suffering, this oppression, this life, this crisis." It is a petition for redemption, a salutation for a savior. The crowds waving palms and strewing the path with cloaks recognize something in Jesus, something regal, something divine.



**N**ow it's often assumed that these folks crowding the highways and shouting "Hosanna" were Jerusalemites come out from the city. But a

careful read of the texts shows that like with Lincoln in Richmond there were two different groups with distinctly different responses to Jesus. Jesus' bearing good news to the poor brings rejoicing in some quarters, but anxiety, fear, anger, even conspiracy to murder in others.

What Scripture refers here to as "the crowd" was made up not so much of the city citizens, but instead mostly of outsiders: pilgrims from the provinces, common people, country dwellers, farmers, shepherds, fisher folk, peasants, day laborers, carpenters ~ all Jesus' people, all coming in from the out districts to celebrate the Passover as required by Jewish law.

The crowds were outsiders, not part of the priestly or ruling elites. These elites are described in verse 10: **"When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the *whole city* was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'"**<sup>2</sup> The "whole city" here is the Jerusalemite aristocracy in fear and confusion about who Jesus is.



This in sharp contrast with the ecstatic shouts of those outside, the "crowd" gathered along the Eastern way was shouting, almost singing "Hosanna." These outsiders thought that they had found in Jesus a Savior, a liberator.



These are two distinct, entirely different groups: one the elite, the other the provincials ~ one at the center, the other from the powerless periphery. The acceptance of Jesus by the marginalized almost guarantees that those at the center will quake in fear, lash out in anger and reject Jesus.

A few short days later these same privileged political and religious leaders will be stirring up a mob outside Pilate's court. Instead of shouting "Hosanna, save us," this mob in sharp contrast shouts "Crucify him. Crucify him. Crucify him."

**T**he Gospels all share a common emphasis on Jesus' divine kingship and the absolute contrast between the kingdom of God represented by Jesus and the kingdoms of

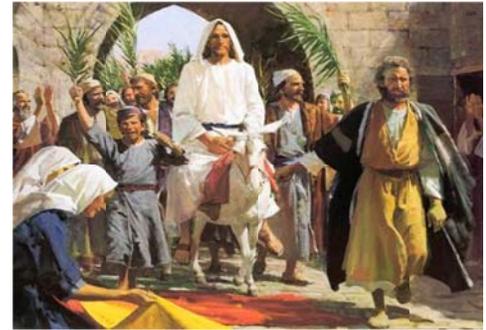


this world, both Jew and Gentile. Truth has consequences. The truth about Jesus gets him executed.

The truth is Jesus is the really real, divinely-chosen monarch of Israel ushering in a new age, a golden age of God's reign in Israel and indeed over the whole earth. But this truth was twisted by enemies into a false indictment of sedition and consequently, though innocent, Jesus suffered execution in the cruelest form of death penalty ever devised.

We live in a world and culture where many live as though choices don't have consequences. Don't be deceived. Every one of our daily choices has consequences. The message of the Palm procession is that truth has consequences, deep consequences. Rejecting Jesus' clear truth has consequences as well, dire consequences. Choices have consequences.

**T**here were competing processions, competing parades that first Palm Sunday ~ we would like to think we would be there shouting out "Hosanna" for Jesus. But would we? Now certainly none of us would find ourselves in that Thursday mob calling for Jesus to be crucified, but would we be in the crowd along the Eastern way proclaiming Jesus as divine savior and sovereign? Are we fully committed or just half-way? Would we welcome all the changes God's reign would entail? Would we really?



Or would we be standing back a bit, not so innocent bystanders, holding back from joyous jubilation? Would we be fully committed or would our skepticism, cynicism and reserve hold us back from full participation in that joyous celebration?

We would live our lives differently if we truly and sincerely believe Jesus is who he says he is, the real sovereign of us each, the nation, the world. We would be different if we gave Jesus our full and undivided loyalty ~ if his divine authority inhabited every corner of our lives. Since truth has consequences, we would make different choices.

We might make courageous choices like Jesus, like Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, like Sojourner Truth, Gandhi, Bonhoeffer. We might

make decisions based less on pragmatism and more on our call from God. We might allow God to show us those critical points where loyalty to God supersedes our loyalty to nation. We might.

We might embrace the changes in us, the ones entailed in becoming full participants in God's reign. We might embrace the risks involved in living the Gospel message as Jesus articulated it, a Gospel of God's community life for all ages:

**“to bring good news to the poor... [and] release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”<sup>3</sup>**



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<sup>1</sup> Admiral David Dixon Porter of Lincoln's Richmond visit

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 21:10

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:18