

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Passion/Palm Sunday, March 16, 2008
Lessons: Zechariah 9:9-10, Mark 11:1-11, and Matthew 13:31-33; 18:1-5

THY KINGDOM COME

By riding the donkey, Jesus sets up his confrontation with the established powers in Jerusalem and with the city's Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Jerusalem is jammed with pilgrims come to celebrate Passover in the ancient center of their faith. Clearly (his enemies would say blatantly), Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah by presenting himself as the Messiah, the one sent to establish the kingdom of God. "The die is cast." The clash now becomes inevitable unless one side backs down, and neither will.

But what kind of confrontation is this to be? My quote, "The die is cast," comes we're told from Julius Caesar when he broke Roman law by crossing the Rubicon River with his legions. The clash of armies that followed, when Rome sent its other great general, Pompey, to engage the rebellious Caesar, is the kind of conflict we recognize. Caesar made his power play, and he won. It was all about power and dominion. But Palm Sunday is much different because Jesus has no legions and no intention of fighting his enemies. He is no Caesar and desires no dominion or power. Jesus is the anti-Caesar, and yet he makes the move that sparks the confrontation, and from all we can see, he makes that move as deliberately as Julius Caesar made his.

If Jesus is not a king and certainly was no "wannabe king" in this world, then what is the kingdom of God? What are we asking for when we pray, "Thy kingdom come"? Jesus spent much of his time and energy teaching people about this kingdom of God and showing them its workings in their midst by healing people, forgiving the sinners, and offering hope to those who lived without hope. It is impossible to understand his teachings unless we recognize that he expected God's kingdom to change this world and called upon us to want that change above all else. It is the pearl of such great value that a person will sell everything gladly to obtain it. It is the leaven working its way through the entire batch of dough until nothing is left unleavened. It is the tiny seed that will grow to a greatness that provides for God's creatures. Fine, but what is the nature of this kingdom of God if it is not a dominion over earth's peoples ruled by divine power?

Neither is it heaven somewhere else. The kingdom is to come here on earth, in the world God created. True, the New Testament promises us a new creation – a new heaven and a new earth – but those are more images for the kingdom of God, and what they promise

is the transformation of this world God loves and of human life on both sides of the grave, not just the far side that lies beyond death. So, this much at least is clear: when I pray, “Thy kingdom come,” I am not praying for the destruction of the world but, rather, for its transformation from death to life. I am not praying for the damnation of unbelievers and evildoers but for their redemption and healing.

Palm Sunday does not represent something new in Jesus’ life and ministry, a change of plans, but only his revealing more openly, in a larger public view, what he has represented all along. Day after day, Jesus has set God’s love and mercy against the conditions of life and forces in society and even the forces in nature that hurt people, damaging them outwardly and inwardly.

What is the kingdom of God? It is the context for life governed by two commandments. The first and greater is, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and the second, which is inseparable from the first, is, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. We are praying for that kind of life.