

“Triumphal Irony”  
St. John 12.12-19 (Series A)  
Palm Sunday, Sunday of the Passion, 2024

Symbolic actions can speak louder than words. Perhaps you experienced some of those symbolic actions on your drive here: certain hand gestures by a fellow commuter. Nothing is said—well, nothing that one can hear with the windows up—and yet you’re able to read the symbol and know its meaning. That’s because someone, at some point, helped you become literate about such symbols.

This building is full of symbols that require literacy, too. When you learn how to read them, they speak meaningfully and you come to understand and appreciate their significance. Take, for instance, .... The nave.... The ceiling.... Reverencing the Holy Cross.... Making the sign of the cross....

But what happens when these powerful symbols are combined with words? An explosion of meaning takes place. Consider the Altar: it symbolizes the sacrificial death of Jesus, since altars are places of sacrifice. But it is also purposely in the shape of a sepulcher, a tomb, – an empty one at that. It is therefore the symbol of the death and resurrection of our Lord. Etched into it are ... Now the meaning is intensified: ....The body and blood of Christ is brought forward through the empty tomb and received here and now in this Sacrament of the Altar.

This morning we immerse ourselves in symbolic actions supercharged with words: A triumphant procession of palms coupled with accolades of “Hosanna”, the Menorah of Hanukkah, the veiling of the Holy Cross. A reality was summons this morning; a true state of affairs was reaffirmed by us; the historic drama of redemption that took place outside of Jerusalem makes itself manifest. Let’s unpack the meaning of these symbols on the day Jesus came to Jerusalem.

Jesus initiates this climatic scene through provocative symbolic action: mounting donkey and riding it into the Capital City, to the Temple itself, during the festival of Passover. Jesus consciously says something new, something daring, by taking existing symbols of Judaism and blending them together in this event we call “the Triumphal Entry.” The outcome is sheer irony: the people hail him as Messiah only to turn around and kill him for affirming what they said. They saw him coming to gain a victory, which he did, but they saw it was a most inglorious defeat. They hail a triumphal entry with joy, but Jesus laments over them with tears.

Let’s get into the scene. It was Passover-time: the great spring festival at the heart of Jewish life. Passover celebrates the Exodus, the time when God set His people free from slavery in Egypt, through the sacrifice of the lamb (that allowed His judgment to ‘pass over’ them) but also through the crossing of the Red Sea, through which Yahweh defeated the armies of their Egyptian enemies. Now, Passover had its own entrenched symbolism, but Jesus wants the people to think about it differently, to think about it taking place *again*, with the exodus being retold, repeated with himself at the center of it. He wants all the meaning of the Passover to be transferred onto himself and reinterpreted in light of his person and work – supremely, his pending death and foretold resurrection. He wants them to think of him as the Passover Lamb, *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*; think of him as the One who would lead a mass of people into the Promised Land of God, a land redefined not in terms of a little plot between Syria and Egypt, but the entire globe. He wants them to anticipate him as “the Coming One” who would drown their enemies, not in the Red Sea or Jordan, but in the waters of Holy Baptism. They should start thinking that he would save all the people of God and not just from the two remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin but people from every nation, people, and language, so as

to reconstitute the twelve tribes to include Jews and Gentiles. He symbolically did this by choosing twelve disciples and walking around them like he was in charge.

This is how he gets the people to start thinking that way: he combines the time and symbols of Passover with those of Hanukkah. Although it's the wrong time of the year, the symbols of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem are paired with Hanukkah – which John already mentioned in 10.22 when he spoke of the “feast of dedication” (called Hanukkah) that took place in December. John mentions Hanukkah in chapter 10 to get the taste of it in our mouths and now in chapter 12 he really wants us to sink our teeth into it, while it's lathered in Passover sauce.

An excursus to explain Hanukkah sets the stage for what Jesus is doing when he takes the symbols of Passover and the symbols of Hanukkah and melds them together with the supercharged words of the crowds, and detonates the scene with new meaning; the implications of which dramatically alter the course of history and the set the creation toward a new beginning.

From the Hebrew word for “dedication” or “consecration,” Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish holiday that marks the re-dedication of the Temple after its desecration by the forces of Antiochus IV and commemorates the “miracle of the container of oil” by the kindling of the lights of the *Menorah*. The story goes like this: By 175 BC Antiochus ascended to the Seleucid throne that occupied Israel. Under his reign the Temple was looted, Jews were massacred, and Judaism was outlawed. Antiochus then ordered an altar to Zeus erected in the Temple, and pigs sacrificed on it to the Greek gods. This proved a major miscalculation because the Jews went ballistic, formed a nation-wide mob and revolted. A Jewish priest named Mattathias and his five sons led the rebellion. By 165 BC the Jewish revolt, captained by Mattathias' son, Judas Maccabaeus, known as

“the Hammer,” shocked the world by crushing the Seleucid monarchy. After recovering Jerusalem, Judas ordered the Temple to be cleansed and a new altar to be built. According to the Talmud, olive oil was needed for the menorah in the Temple, which was required to burn throughout every night. But at the re-dedication following the victory of the Maccabees over the Antiochus’ occupying Seleucid army, there was only enough consecrated olive oil to fuel the eternal flame in the Temple for one day, but it lasted over a week. So an 8-day festival was declared to commemorate this miracle — that’s the festival of Hanukkah.

It fits into Jesus’ Palm Sunday triumphal entry like this: When Judas Maccabaeus defeated the pagan invaders and cleansed the Temple, his followers entered the city waving palm branches in celebration. Palm branches are the symbol of the Jewish victory over their enemies, the symbol of the triumph of Hanukkah. Jesus evokes this symbol and Hanukkah’s meaning to be summoned when he rides into Jerusalem as the Anointed and victorious “light of the world.”

We don’t have to look far to find out why. Hanukkah was when Judas became king of Israel. Jesus and his followers commingled Hanukkah and Passover. They were saying both that, Jesus was the true king come to claim his throne, cleanse the Temple of the pollution of the pagan Romans and their filthy cult of emperor worship, *and* that this was the moment when God would liberate His people once and for all; when the greater exodus was taking place, not on a local scale but a global one. It begins now because the true light of the world had arrived. They were eliciting the symbols and meaning of Hanukkah and Passover, even the Jewish significance of the number eight. The eight main branches of the Menorah or eight days of the Passover feast, represented divine transcendence and Israel’s unique role in human history. While seven is the number of creation, the first week of the world; eight, being one step beyond,

represents the first day of the new creation, of new light: a new world order — which is why baptismal fonts are typically octagonal. And so the crowd goes wild — the hope of a new creation about to dawn, new light after the darkness of pagan occupation. The celebration get nuts and people spread their clothes in the street, climb trees —dropping palms, frenzied waving. But there’s more.

The ride on the donkey, with its prophetic echo from Zech 9.9, which would have been as obvious a sign to the Jews lining the streets making the same point as the Hanukkah palm branches and the God-send of menorah light in dark times.

Now the scene is topped-off with words from Ps 118. Remember that the Psalms were not just a hymnal and prayer book; they were also understood to be a prophetic book. So when the crowd starts shouting out, “*Hosanna: Blessed in the Name of Yahweh is the Coming One,*” this crowds that followed Jesus after seeing him raise Lazarus were now re-appropriating the words with which—in their original use—the priests blessed the procession entering the Temple, and slapped them onto Jesus. The quotation of Psalm 118 was something more than a religious welcome: This saying recognized him as “the Coming One,” even as Martha said to him a few days earlier: “*Lord: I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.*” It was a confession, a creed, an oath of allegiance to Jesus as God’s Messiah, their king. Explosive, explosive stuff.

Jesus is the anointed king, coming at last to set his people free. Wave your palm branches! Get them in the air. Shout “Hosanna!” Picture the scene with Jews sporting big No.1 foam fingers; shouting and dancing, “Go, Jesus; go, Jesus; stomp some Romans; take the temple.” But here again we find another irony: the Jews in the crowd glossed over the fact that Jesus was riding a donkey, not a steed, missing the meaning of the symbol that said that Jesus’ actions presented

a conscious corrective to a planned political and military overthrow. He was not riding a war horse. He was cruising in low gear on an ass.

Don't think that there is any suggestion in the text that riding a little donkey bespeaks of humility, that Jesus comes (as the mistranslation of the KJV would have it) "*lowly, riding upon an ass.*" It's quite the opposite: the ass and the mule were the animals used in peace by great leaders for their processions, just in the same way that they would have used a horse in war. The whole point of the Zech. 9 prophecy was that the Messiah was coming in *peace*. The king, then, in the vision of Zechariah, rode upon an ass to signify that he came in peace, not to destroy but to save; and the entry to Jerusalem should have been understood as the reception of the *Prince of Peace*, peace even for the Roman Gentiles. Meanwhile the crowd wanted him to nail the Gentiles to the wall. It would turn out that he would be nailed to a tree. The glorification of the Messiah isn't to be found in the triumphal entry after all. It's to be found in his coronation ceremony, when he ascends the throne of the cross and dons a crown of thorns. Irony upon irony.

Jesus wanted the symbols to be combined with the words being heralded: the King, the Coming One, the Messiah of God, was the victorious Judas Maccabeaus, the Hammer of their enemies, who was bringing the peace of salvation by crushing not the Romans but sin, death and the devil under his feet, feet spiked to a stretch of timber. *And they didn't see it coming.* Even though they were shouting out, "Hosanna," which means, "Save, I pray" they hadn't a clue that the salvation he was bringing was to have the judgment of God "pass over" them onto himself as the king representing his people. The true enemies were themselves, not the Romans. And coming in peace, all were given the good news that God's kingdom was breaking in, not through the tip of a sword but the tip of

spear thrust into His Son's side, so that the Lord God—not the Lord Caesar—could reign over a kingdom of peace through the grace and mercy of Jesus.

This is why John frames the episode within the continuing story of Lazarus. Jesus has set Lazarus free from nothing less than death itself, and the great crowd that now follows him into the city have come because this event has galvanized them into action. There were two streams of people: the crowd that were spectators of the Lazarus miracle and a distinct crowd that hear them bearing this testimony and came out to meet him and, it seems, were caught up in the euphoria, spreading their clothes in street and waving palm branches, too. But it's a short-lived celebration. If not in their eyes when Jesus goes into the Temple and judges their institutions, rendering them defunct and transferring the symbolic meaning and purpose of the Temple onto himself, then the celebration was short-lived in Jesus' tear-filled eyes because the people don't get it, don't get him, don't get the Scriptures, don't get the salvation and peace he brings. The miracle of Lazarus was not a power-grab for military credentials. It was gospel drama, a preview to the Messiah and the new covenant people of God.

And yet, they did get some of it. The people were literate to most of these things and that is why it set some, like the Pharisees and chief priests, on edge. The Pharisees formed the party who were most deeply opposed to Jesus and who concocted a scheme to arrest him, that would ultimately be carried out by the chief priests – the most influential members of the ruling-class Sanhedrim. And now the darker side of the story comes to the fore. Because Lazarus has become a primary reason for people to believe in Jesus' messiahship, the chief priests want to kill him, along with Jesus. Kill the problem. Kill the movement. Kill both.

The Pharisees, like Caiaphas before them, despair about what the multitudes say about Jesus: “*Can’t you see that the whole world is going after him.*” It turns out that they make an unconscious prophecy: the Holy Spirit is speaks through them. By his being lifted up on the bloodied cross, he in fact draws the world to himself. The irony here is never thicker. His time is at hand; the cat is out of the bag. And this is what your king is like: crucified to death to get the victory, resurrected to gift you with the spoils. The irony that defeat and death truly yield victory and life.

Now what jolts me is that it wasn’t just the Pharisees and chief priests who marched lockstep to innuendo about Jesus; the disciples sipped the Cool Aid™ too. They didn’t comprehend the nature of Jesus’ kingship either. It wasn’t until they were illuminated by the Holy Spirit following Christ’s resurrection that they began to see reality rightly. In fact, what they recognized was Jesus in the breaking of the Bread. He rules with the power of Shalom in and as the Eucharist. You, too, have the Holy Spirit that you may know Him and experience His life-giving, guilt-and-shame assuaging rule as the Christ of the Eucharist. This procession we’ve been a part of is a call to open allegiance and vocal recognition, one that leads to the Altar and Crucifix that heralds the reality to which the world is to conform: The crucified and Eucharistic Christ, true Son of God, true Son of Mary, is our King. A so-called “triumphal entry” misses the point. It was a death march to Golgotha where the true victory is won. Our procession is to the true triumphal entry that takes place in *verbum* of Holy Communion, where He enters here on paten and in chalice as our Savior and victory: Hosanna, to the Son of David. Amen.