

Self-Giving Psalm 118

Two Processions

Today is Passion Sunday—and also Palm Sunday. On this day, we remember how Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Some scholars suggest that Jesus' procession into the city may have happened on the very same day that Pontius Pilate entered Jerusalem from another gate.

It was the beginning of Passover week, and crowds were flooding the city to celebrate. And on that spring morning, two very different processions made their way into Jerusalem. On one side, there was Jesus, riding on a donkey, surrounded by his disciples and ordinary people. On the other side, there was Pilate—the Roman governor—riding a powerful warhorse, leading a well-armed military parade. Pilate knew the spirit of liberation that Passover represented. He feared uprisings. So every year, as the festival began, he marched into Jerusalem with his soldiers to remind the people who was in charge. His procession was a public display of imperial strength.

And then, from the opposite side of the city, came Jesus. Not on a warhorse, but on a humble donkey. No swords, no soldiers. Just children waving palm branches and people crying out, “Hosanna! Save us!” If you were there that day and had to pick which parade looked more powerful, more important—you’d probably point to Pilate.

Jesus’ procession looked small, fragile, even foolish by comparison. And yet, Jesus walked with confidence—because he knew where he was going. He was walking the path of his calling. The path of self-giving.

Jesus and Don Quixote

I’ve read and preached this Palm Sunday passage many times. But this year, something unexpected came to mind. As I imagined Jesus riding into Jerusalem, I saw a strange connection—a connection between Jesus and Don Quixote, the wandering knight from Cervantes’ classic novel.

You remember the story. Don Quixote rides an old, tired horse. He wears a dented suit of armor. And with great sincerity—and maybe a touch of madness—he sets off to save the world. But he’s not fighting dragons or tyrants. He’s swinging at windmills. He’s mocked for being out of touch, lost in a fantasy, living in a world that no longer exists. People say he’s crazy. Delusional. Foolish. And maybe he is. But still—he chooses that road. Even through the laughter, even through the shame, he believes he’s fighting for what’s right. There’s a song from the musical *Man of La Mancha* that captures his spirit. It’s called “The Impossible Dream.” You might recognize the words:

To dream the impossible dream,
To fight the unbeatable foe,
To bear with unbearable sorrow,
To run where the brave dare not go...

This is my quest, to follow that star,
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far...
To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause.

Maybe it’s the song of a madman. Or maybe it’s the prayer of someone brave enough to believe in something bigger than himself. And I wonder: doesn’t Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem feel a bit like that? Not riding a warhorse, but a donkey. Not surrounded by troops, but by children and peasants. Not flags and swords—but palm branches and pleas of “Hosanna!” Compared to Pilate’s military parade, Jesus must have looked foolish. Ordinary. Powerless. Out of step with reality.

But Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. He wasn’t out of touch—he was radically faithful. He wasn’t avoiding reality—he was walking straight into it. He chose the cross. He carried the weight of the world’s brokenness. And he moved forward—not with domination, but with self-giving love.

He dared to dream the “impossible” dream: The Kingdom of God. A kingdom not built by force, but by forgiveness. Not by power, but by compassion. Not by taking—but by giving. And we know now what the world couldn’t see then: That what looked foolish was the wisdom of God. That what looked weak was the strength that saves. And that the flame of self-giving love, which seemed to die on the cross— is still burning. It still lights the way for all of us who choose to follow.

The Light of Moral Beauty

Psychologist Adam Hoffman says that when we witness acts of moral beauty—When we see courage, compassion, and kindness in action—Something powerful happens inside us. We feel connected to something greater. We’re lifted out of self-focus and into generosity. Awe wakes us up. Think for a moment about people who’ve shown deep, sacrificial love for others. When we hear their stories, our hearts stir. We feel something holy. Let me show you an image. [ppt]

At first, it looks like a group of cyclists. But look closely. Some riders are missing legs. Others wear prosthetics. This is the Gaza Sunbirds—a team of paracyclists. Most of them lost limbs to war—gunfire, airstrikes. But instead of giving up, they trained for the Paralympics.

And then war came again. Their plans changed. They got back on their bikes—not for sport, but for service. They started delivering food, medicine, and supplies to families in desperate need.

One of the riders, Alaa al-Dali, said this: “Families depend on the Sunbirds. They’re astonished when they see us coming—people with disabilities bringing aid. But it’s more than that. We are rising to the challenge. And that brings hope. People get emotional when they see us.”

Can you picture it? In the middle of war and pain, These riders chose hope. They chose to give. They chose love over fear. And that kind of courage—That kind of moral beauty— It stirs something in us. Because when we see people living for something bigger than themselves—We remember what’s possible. We remember who we’re called to be.

Walking the Way of the Cross

And this is the path Jesus walked. Jesus emptied himself. He gave himself fully—for love. For the healing of the world. And when we stand before that kind of love—That kind of beauty and courage—We remember: We are part of something greater, too. We were made to walk this road. To love boldly. To give generously. To follow Jesus—not just in belief, but in life.

Throughout history, others have walked that same path. You know Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. While most churches in Nazi Germany praised Hitler, Bonhoeffer fixed his eyes on the costly grace he saw at the cross. Out of love for his neighbors, he joined the resistance. He was arrested. Eventually executed. And still—he walked in hope. As he was led to the gallows, he said: “This is the end—but for me, it is the beginning of life.”

There are others. Corrie ten Boom. Martin Luther King Jr. Elisabeth Elliot. Clarence Jordan. And then there are names not written in books, but written on our hearts. Don Kennedy. Judy Anderson. Barbara Cole. Warren Cole. Carl Bishop Sr. Linda Mills. Dick White.

They may not be called heroes. But I’ve seen in them the light of Christ. And friends—that light is shining in you, too. Not all of us will shine the same way. But I believe each of us is called to be a light in this world.

So what do we do with all of this? The donkey. The windmills. The cross. The bike. The names. How do we live into this holy calling? Self-giving! That’s the answer. That’s the way.

This is the day the Lord has made—let us rejoice and be glad in it. Not because it is easy, but because it is sacred. Because the way of the cross is the way of life.

So may our lives reflect the goodness of humanity, the beauty of life, and above all—the power of love in Jesus Christ. Amen.