

Perhaps you have heard of the Hasty Pudding parade in Cambridge Massachusetts. Each year Harvard students choose a man and woman of the year in the field of entertainment, bring them to Cambridge, honor them with a parade through the downtown streets, and have a gala dinner and roast. In the process, the organizers create publicity for their own theatrical productions. The honor of the award may seem somewhat dubious. As the parade travels through the streets, the honoree is surrounded by students dressed in drag, and what can most politely be described as ironic and rude comments are shouted out. At the same time the person is being honored, they are also being humbled and cut down to size. It is a farce, a parody of celebrity.

Switch to Jerusalem. Jesus enters the city, being hailed as king. But is he riding in on a handsome steed, brandishing all the accoutrements of power, sword flashing, fancy clothes blowing in the wind? Not hardly. Jesus enters the city on a donkey, a poor man's transport. His clothes are nothing special, just the usual robe he wore every day. No purple of royalty here, no flowing cape wafting in the wind. No footmen leading the way, clearing a path in the crowd. Jesus is a parody of what we take for earthly authority. It is a little like an April Fool's joke, when servants would mimic their masters, giving them mock respect. The people knew exactly what Jesus was doing, as they quickly cut palm branches and laid them in front of the donkey walking into town. "Hosanna! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven." Through such parody Jesus was demonstrating the pomposity, the arrogance, of power. Such earthly power, Jesus was showing, had no real authority. The powers and authorities were not amused.

That's not how we usually portray the Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem. We want to see it as a triumphal expression of God's power, a show of force, if you will. We want Christ to be the Messiah of the Old Testament or Revelation, the one who will come on a white horse with power and dread, and slay all those who stand against us, and put things right, as we see it. We want a Christ who is on our side.

But instead we have a Christ who appears as a fool, mocking power as if he were a court jester. Mocking power because that kind of power is only a cruel façade, which in the end is powerless. Power that enslaves turns around on itself and binds those in power, trapped in constant vigilance and fear in order to maintain their position. Power that kills even in the name of righteousness, only propagates more killing in spiraling circles of vengeance. William Sloane Coffin has said there are two ways to have strength. One way is to have many weapons, the other way is to have few enemies. How often have we seen powerful regimes brought down because there is a limit to how much power can repress. As their enemies grow, so do the weapons. But there aren't enough weapons to suppress the human spirit of freedom or the power of love forever. As coercive and brutal raw power can be, it is in the end a paper tiger. The power of love and the love of freedom, as vulnerable and fragile as they may seem, are stronger.

Life is of course irony on irony, paradox on paradox. Jesus it turns out *is* the king after all. The one who proceeded into Jerusalem making fun of royalty, *is* royalty. But only those who love, who love him, can see it. Only those who love will spread the palm branches before him, bend the knee to worship him. Only those who love will follow him and obey him. He does not coerce our dedication, he loves us into it. He respects our freedom to choose him, and that is why true freedom is found in serving him rather than serving the powers. Jesus is the master of paradox – real power is found in weakness, true freedom is found in service, our true

selves are found in giving ourselves away, true greatness is found in humility, true life is found through death.

The complaint that clergy hear almost every year about Palm Sunday, is that we spoil all that good feeling we get in the beginning of the service with the procession and the palms and the Hosannas, by moving quickly into the passion. It *is* a good feeling, the sense of triumph and festivity sweeps us along with the rest of the crowd. It is jolly to watch as Jesus mocks the authorities, but then suddenly we realize that the joke is on us, too. We may not be the ones in power, but we would like to be. We all have some corner of our world where we have influence and we have the choice: whether to relate to it in the context of power, or in the context of love and freedom. We realize the joke is on us because we too love our own power, even as we fear and resent the power of those over us.

The trappings of power are seductive, and we all succumb. Power tells us we are competent, in control, secure. We will sell our freedom for a taste of power, for a bit of security, much as Esau sold his birthright to his brother Jacob for a bowl of stew when he was hungry. Freedom threatens power. So we learn to fear such freedom, try to tame it, and if we cannot tame it, we will try to kill it. That is why we move quickly into the passion narrative, where we become uncomfortably aware of our complicity in Jesus' betrayal as we shout with the rest of the crowd "Crucify."

We would like to avoid the passion altogether, but there is no getting around the cross. We would prefer to have the triumph and upbeat feelings of Palm Sunday, then come right back next week for the resurrection of Easter. But life isn't like that, and we know it. We have to travel through the passion, through Jesus' humiliation, torture and death before we can know

new life. That is the way things were for Jesus, and that is the way things are for us. We simply cannot avoid the cross.

If anyone could have avoided the cross, it would have been Jesus. He had power over demons and illness, power even over death itself. But Jesus chose to accept his cross, to be in solidarity with our suffering, with our sin, with our death. He did it to show that the power of sin and darkness and death could not be defeated by force, but only by the power of love manifested in vulnerability and self-giving.

The good news, of course, is the cross is not the last word. Next week we will see this power of love resurrected into new life. Come and see where the Palm Sunday procession really ends.