

Sermon for Palm Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

A few times now, we've started our Lenten journey on Ash Wednesday with a quick history lesson from the Roman Empire. For the record, if you're wondering how often I think about the Roman Empire, it's a lot, probably daily or at least several times a week. I can't help it, it's a hazard of the job. We've started Lent a few times with the story of the phrase "memento mori," which means, "Remember that you will die." The idea was, when a conquering general returned to Rome and paraded through the city in all their finery, it was one soldier's job to ride along in the chariot with the general. While the entire city fawned over the victor, it was that one soldier's job to lean in close and whisper in the general's ear: "memento mori. Remember that you will die." It was one part humility and one part mid-level threat. The powers that be can always take you down a notch if you get too big for your toga.

Actually, that image of the returning conqueror is fascinating to me today. The general and army returned proud with the spoils of war. The general, at least, was either on horseback or in a chariot, but either way, he was carried into the city with the aid of a warhorse. Now, I don't know if you've ever seen different breeds of horses up close, but there's a lot of variety. Icelandic horses, they're little things, maybe 5-and-a-half feet tall. But take a beast like a Clydesdale or a Percheron, and I'm eye-level with a broad chest of solid muscle and a head towering high enough to scratch Heaven's underbelly. The general came home carried by something like that. Riches on parade, power as real as it was visible, a subtle threat to stay in line humming underneath. For a regular person watching the parade, you may be Roman, but you're not in power. Or you might not even be Roman, and then what. All you can hope is to be treated well for someone of your status. You don't need to be reminded of your place or your death. You know those things all too well.

And then comes Jesus. He's a homeless dude on the back of a colt. Y'all know a colt is basically just a teenage horse, right? Like, it's not remotely full grown. I'm not even sure it's safe to put a grown man on a colt, and even if it is, that sucker isn't doing any conquering. It'd barely be any good for plowing. And that's his mount. A different telling of the story puts him on a donkey instead, and while that would be a more solid animal, it lacks the noble gravitas of a warhorse. It's common. Jesus entering Jerusalem is triumphant in some ways. We like the palms, the songs, the people getting behind him and his message right at the tail end of the story. But we miss something that would've been very clear to them. Jesus on the colt is satire. He returns to the ruling city on the back of a half-grown borrowed horse. But the city is Jerusalem, not Rome. The King of Kings is about to be enthroned but the throne of this world is on the other side of the Mediterranean while Jesus' throne is a cross outside the city walls of a backwater capitol. Not only that, but he comes to his throne on a half-grown parody of the massive warhorse. This is no conqueror, this has to be a joke. The palms wave, but no riches flow. There are no swords nor spears, no warriors, no captives, no spoils of any sort. The songs do not praise the victors; they praise a man of peace. Where the conquerors left a trail of the dead, Lazarus - the dead man risen - walks with Jesus. And where the general returns expecting praise and glory and maybe even a promotion, Jesus returns expecting his hour to come, the hour of sacrifice, pain, and the grave.

Where the parody finds its deepest meaning is in the message whispered along the parade route. In the chariot, the soldier reminds the puffed-up general that he will die. Memento mori. But on the back of the colt, memento mori does follow Jesus. Only it's no lowly soldier whispering, it's God. All the palms, all the songs, all the colts in the world can't stand between Jesus and the cross. Where the general needed the reminder because, really, it wasn't that likely to happen to him anytime soon, Jesus can't escape it hounding him all the way to Calvary, and Calvary is mighty nigh. But there's another whisper beneath it all. Maybe it's a whisper for Jesus. Maybe it's for his disciples. Maybe it's for onlookers that can't understand what's unfolding before them.

But that whisper is different. *Memento vitae*, remember that you will live. We know that whisper now, loud and clear. We've heard this story, told this story so many times, the surprise ending isn't a surprise anymore. But it was a surprise for them. And no matter how many times they heard hints of that whisper, no matter how many times Jesus assured them all would be well, they couldn't really believe death could ever lose its sting.

We know where this is headed. We know the parody became glory of its own. We honor the simplicity of that parade, the homeliness of the mount, the irony of the enthroning hymn on the road to Golgotha. And in the days to come, our little church will walk that road along with Christians all over the world. Our focus'll shift every day from celebration to betrayal to service to death. We need to go to those places, and we need to feel all the joy and loss that comes with them. But we go there together, and we go there with the knowledge of the not-so-surprise ending. The thing is, the loss of this week is such a hard reminder of the ways this world works. When luminaries raise their heads, systems shoot them down. Courage is a dangerous thing, and it takes a mighty heap of courage to parade in the face of the systems that bind us 'cause we know all too well what happens when we do.

I don't think we need that *memento mori* reminder of death all that much. We know it all too well, especially this church this week. But we do need the reminder that death does not get the final say. The whisper our entire world needs right now undergirds that fateful parade two millenia past. *Memento vitae*, remember that you will live. No matter what comes, be it satire or humility or death itself, remember that you will live.