

*“You’re Invited to a Procession”*

(Matthew 21.1-11)

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*Two Processions*

Two processions enter Jerusalem for the week prior to Passover...

Through the west gate comes Pilate, the Roman Governor. He’s coming from his residence on the coast – the fancy modern port city of Caesarea – to be in Jerusalem for the festival... in case there’s trouble. And there often was... Jerusalem is the very heart of Jewish hope, identity and faith... always a hot-house for revolutionary passions. Normally a city of 40,000 people, it becomes a tinderbox at Passover when an extra 200,000 pilgrims cram into its walls. And so Pilate comes bringing reinforcements for the regular garrison stationed at the Fortress Antonio... strategically placed looking over the Temple and its courts.

*His procession is about power and deterrence... it’s meant to remind the city who is boss. And so ‘it’s’ all on display... The gold eagle standard of Rome’s imperial power... the horse cavalry of Pilate’s household guard... and a column of foot soldiers from Caesarea’s legion... Pilate and his wife carried aloft by slaves, lying regally on satin cushions. Imagine it – the drums, the regulated thump of marching feet, swords and spears bristling in the sun, the clatter of horse hooves on cobbled roads. It’s the ancient-world version of ‘shock and awe’... and it says to the city, ‘We’re in charge! This is the way the world is and don’t even dream of it ever being any different.’*

There are no cheers to greet them – just the sullen masked faces of the oppressed, turning away in hatred.

But coming through the *east* gate is a very different parade. It’s the rag-tag peasant ‘army’ of the Jesus Movement. We should imagine somewhere around 30-40 of them – certainly more than the symbolic ‘twelve’ disciples – because it is a movement and it has serious support. *This* procession is intended to mock and challenge the imperial procession on the other side of the city. And it couldn’t be more different... no drums, no weapons, no fine clothes, no gold eagle... and there’s the ‘main man’, the rabbi some say may even be the Messiah... riding on a donkey! (There’s not a horse in sight!) And the crowd *love* it! They spread cloaks and wave palm branches as if it *were* a royal

procession... cheering in jubilation, remembering prophecies of better times. *'Hosanna to David's son! Blessed is he who comes in God's name.'*

The entrance of the Jesus Movement is planned and staged to challenge the 'business-as-usual' world of first century Palestine – a society ruled by Temple collaborators and Roman power; where the rural population are being impoverished to the point of slavery; and where violence, corruption and injustice is making a mockery of the nation's faith in God. *This procession is saying it's time for a new world* – a world of peace not war; a world for people, not powerful wealthy elites; a world where all the nations will gather together in worship of the one true God... the God that Jesus says is synonymous with mercy and love. It's signalling the end of an old order and the beginning of that new world Jesus called *the Kingdom of God*... and everyone – especially the poor and oppressed – are invited to the banquet table.

It's a day of celebration and laughter on this side of town. But as you imagine it, also remember the noise a big protest rally makes... especially in a Middle Eastern city street – the volume and the passion... the power and the grunt of it. For this *is* protest... this *is* challenge... a movement with a voice calling for a different world. The movement has followed Jesus to Jerusalem. And Pilate and his Temple collaborators *can* 'hear' it... and they know it's trouble.

The whole of Jerusalem holds its breath... *What now? What happens now?*

### ***Participating***

There is some *major* denial being practised by the disciples... but Jesus *has* made it very clear what is being asked of them this week... what he's inviting them to be part of. On the road to Jerusalem, the gospels tell us he spells it out to them THREE times! Here's Matthew (16.21)

*"From that time on, Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and endure great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests... to be put to death..."*

Each time the disciples refuse to hear it. But Jesus does make it crystal clear...

*"If any want to be my followers, let them forget their own safety and take up the cross and follow me." (16.24)*

It helps if we hear this in paraphrase...

*'Jesus gathered his inner circle and said, "I need to tell you how it is. It's time for the final challenge, and Jerusalem is the place it has to happen... At Passover when everyone's there, so there can be no confusion about what we're saying. And I need you to know... that I think this road is going to be very rough... full of suffering. The Temple is most likely to reject me, and there's every chance they'll try to kill me... There's death waiting, maybe even a cross. But... in all this, I trust my father God – even if it's this, there will be new life. If that's what comes – a cross – I'll accept it as a doorway to new life.*

*Don't try to talk me out of it. I have to do this – for God... for the Kingdom... for that different life we've dreamed of for our people. This is the only way. I know that now. Come with me! Walk with me! Let's do this together. And if it's a cross for all of us, then trust me... trust God... this path leads through death to life. You will be with me in the Kingdom!'"*

It is this literal – no comfortable metaphor for them. He's asking them to go with him to Jerusalem and face whatever comes... knowing that rejection and death is the likely outcome. No wonder the disciples don't listen... no wonder they practise denial. I assume they enter Jerusalem on this day thinking they're going to win. And why not... *look at the adoring crowds!*

As church, we've protected ourselves from how confronting this call is by some fancy doctrinal footwork. We've read Christ's suffering and death as *substitution* – he does it *for* us... meaning, he does it *in order that we don't need to*... he does it *instead* of us. But that's avoidance and denial. The call is crystal clear, even 2,000 years later... *'Take up the cross and follow me... walk with me... we do this together.'*

The call is to *participate*... to join in. If we want to know that new and abundant life Christ promises, we must walk the path he walks. This is the Jesus *movement!* It is the *Way* – not belief, not attendance, not watching from a safe distance... none of that will get it done. It is the *Way* – it goes *through* suffering and death – and we must walk it with him!

### ***You're Invited to Join a Procession***

Today, we're invited to join a procession. Not the powerful one, the parade of winners, but the other one – the procession of the Jesus Movement. And so today, in worship, we ritualise the

march... But the real action of course has to be lived-out in our lives. We're invited to join the Jesus Movement and challenge the oppressive normality of how we've been told life '*has to be*'. If we choose to follow Christ, each and every day is a protest against that old *self-obsessed* way of life.

- It means living a lifestyle that practices peace... instead of easy solutions of power, violence and war.
- A lifestyle that says the earth is a gift for all people, not just the lucky privileged few.
- A life that puts the God of love and mercy at the heart and centre of everything, knowing there can be no true life without all people gathering once again in the Creator's light.
- It means a life that says it's never just about me and mine – it's always about us.
- A lifestyle that believes in a new world... hopes for a new world... works for a new world.

### ***Conclusion***

Today, we're invited to join a procession. And it's a happy day, because there's laughter, hope and celebration in this parade.

But we need to remember that we're joining a movement of protest and challenge. Remember... the '*old order*' doesn't want things to change – they like things just the way they are. Remember... there are powerful forces in society that will fight to stop anything changing. And there are resistant forces within each and every one of us, that find their security in the old life, and are desperately afraid of the new.

*If* we decide to join the Jesus Movement today – and I am unashamedly recruiting – remember the path that Christ says is ahead of us... a road that leads through suffering and death. If we join the procession, that's where we're travelling.