



## **PALM SUNDAY**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

**Sunday, April 5, 2009**

**Rodney Alphonso Thomas, Jr.**

Masters of Divinity Student, Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX

#### **I. Ascending While Forgiving**

In the spring of 1994, I was one of a handful of African Americans students in my fifth grade homeroom class at a predominantly European-American elementary school. One Friday that April, my class gathered for the regular student news program that was viewed on the television in our classroom. The one story that I will never forget was the announcement that Nelson Mandela had won the presidency of South Africa. The journalist described to the audience the humiliating circumstances which Mr. Mandela and his fellow black South Africans had endured. I had never thought of the possibility of a person of color becoming the head of state in a country where whites and blacks struggled so hard to coexist. The story of Nelson Mandela continues to be one of the most amazing stories in history. One who was denied, beaten, jailed, rose with humility to become the chief, the leader, the president of the very ones who denied him his rights

as a human being for so long. This rejected cornerstone became the builder of the new South Africa. This story is all the more amazing for the fact that, in spite of his decades long brutal treatment, Mandela emerged as a leader with a forgiving heart who called for a peaceful transition from the old political regime to his; what a testimony. He triumphantly ascends to the presidency from a jail cell after being wrongfully imprisoned for more than a quarter century and what the world sees as he emerges is a man of peace, grace and one who forgives.

## II. History Section

Christians celebrate Palm Sunday in remembrance of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. This image of the King of kings, riding on a donkey rather than a horse-led chariot, is the Church's glimpse into what the Empire (in Greek, *basilea*) of God looks like. The reason we utilize the Psalms as part of our Palm Sunday celebration is because many Psalms were written to orient the assembly of the Lord to God's order and intentions for the universe. Many of the Psalms give expression to the reality that God is trustworthy and reliable, and to the decision to stake our life on this particular God."<sup>1</sup> The twentieth Psalm portrays God as the sole governor of the universe and as a God who is reliable.

David shows wisdom in Psalm 20 in that he reminds the assembly that, while foreign emperors may place their trust in chariots and horses, the community of faith is to look to the Lord, who is their defender (v.7-9). The Davidic tradition which exhorts believers to trust this God to be their defender is continued in the prophetic tradition, particularly in First Isaiah (Isaiah 7-9) and Zechariah. Matthew saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy given in Zechariah 9:9-10:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will *cut off the chariot* from Ephraim and the *war-horse* from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall *command peace* to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.  
[*Emphasis mine*]

Scholar Michael Joseph Brown argues that if we take Matthew's story (Matthew 21:1-11) about Jesus' arrival in context, the "horse was the customary war animal. The ass, by contrast, was a draft animal, used to carry persons and goods." Zechariah 9:9 indicates that for a king (essentially a military figure) to ride on an ass was beneath his status. In other words, Jesus had humbled himself by arriving in this fashion.<sup>2</sup>

The Empire of God does not arrive to us in the violent, arrogant, law-and-order politics which favor the richest and most powerful in society. Rather, God's reign appears in nonviolent resistance, compassion and justice for the least of these. It is, therefore, a mistake to refer to Palm Sunday as an observance of the Triumphant Entry of King Jesus; in actuality, it was, as Dominic Crossan calls it, the **Anti-Triumphant Entry** where Jesus reveals the Lord's counter to the traditional Roman imperial parades.<sup>3</sup> Humility and faithfulness always take priority over pride and unrestraint in the Empire of God.

## III. Palm Sunday Songs

During the American colonial period, enslaved Africans, much like the Israelites and Judeans during the reign of Kings David and Solomon, wrote psalms that we now refer to as the Spirituals. These enslaved African Christians trusted in the God of Israel and Jesus Christ who was, to them, the King of kings and LORD of lords. The spirituals serve as an example of faith in the unseen. The only rulers that the enslaved Africans could see were the human beings who claimed to be their earthly masters; but, the biblical story taught the enslaved black Christians that the LORD was the master of all human beings and, therefore, no human had a right to possess another person.

- a. **Zekiel (Ezekiel) Saw De Wheel** - This Spiritual describes the enslaved African's expectation of the coming of the Empire of God. The LORD's throne-chariot in Ezekiel's vision was reminiscent of the storm images in the Exodus narrative. The message is clear in this song: Jesus is King and reigns on the Cross, his humble "chariot."

Wheel, oh, wheel  
Wheel in de middle of a wheel  
Wheel, oh, wheel  
Wheel in de middle of a wheel

'Zekiel saw de wheel of time  
Wheel in de middle of a wheel  
Ev'ry spoke was human kind  
Way in de middle of a wheel  
Way up yonder on de mountain top  
Wheel in d middle of a wheel  
My Lord an' de chariot stop  
Way in de middle of a wheel

'Zekiel saw de wheel  
Way up in de middle of de air  
'Zekiel saw de wheel  
Way in de middle of de air  
De big wheel run by faith  
Little wheel run by de grace of God  
Wheel in a wheel  
Way in de middle of de air

Wheel, oh, wheel  
Wheel in de middle of a wheel.<sup>4</sup>

- b. **Ride On King Jesus** - This is a Spiritual that recognizes the inability of any human being to prevent the Empire of God from being established because of the life, death and resurrection of Christ as well being maintained in the life of Christ's followers.

Ride on King Jesus!  
No man can-a-hinder him  
Ride on King Jesus!  
No man can-a-hinder him

Jesus rides on a milk white horse  
No man can-a-hinder him  
The river Jordan he did cross  
No man can-a-hinder him

If you want to find your way to God  
No man can-a-hinder him  
The gospel highway must be trod  
No man can-a-hinder him

I was young when I begun  
No man can-a-hinder him  
But now my race is almost run  
No man can-a-hinder him.<sup>5</sup>

- c. **Hosanna** - We sing hosanna, hosanna, because the LORD God reigns and we know that crying out to the Prince of Peace is what brings us true salvation. Hosanna could serve as the anthem for the Empire of God.

Hosanna. Hosanna.  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.  
Hosanna. Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.  
Blessed is He who comes in the name of Lord.<sup>6</sup>

- d. **There's Something About that Name** - This song recognizes the temporality of human kingdoms and political establishments. It recognizes Jesus, God of our Salvation and Savior of all of creation. This is the name (not those of presidents, kings, and cultural personalities) that is above all other names.

Jesus, Jesus! There's just  
something about that name!  
Master, Savior, Jesus! Like the fragrance of the rain;  
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!  
Let all heaven and earth proclaim;  
Kings and kingdoms will all pass away, but there's  
something about that name!<sup>7</sup>

#### IV. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text

Palm Sunday is a day of observance where the Body of Christ honors Jesus Christ's Anti-Triumphant entry into Jerusalem where the Roman Empire's unjust ways stand in condemnation.

It should not be difficult for us, as citizens living in the world's lone hyper-power, the United States of America, to imagine the hope for salvation that the Roman imperial parades gave their subjected masses. Perhaps the modern equivalent of those ancient parades is now made manifest in the partisan fundraising banquets held by the two major political parties. It is in city convention centers and the homes of the most wealthy that select American citizens are allowed access to politicians, while citizens in the middle and lower classes of American society can only receive their representatives' attention either after some natural or economic disaster or when a segment of the population gets together to petition and protest at governors' mansions and capitol buildings. In American politics, money talks; we see that as evident in the vast amounts of money raised in the 2004, 2006 and 2008 presidential and congressional elections and by who obtained or remained in power because of the funds raised. These persons rode into town on horses of victory because of their financial prowess.

Why do average Americans continue to limit the definition of participation in the American public square to going to the voting booth and then sit idly by leaving policy decisions to special interests? How can the works of Jesus continue to, as one familiar Easter Season song says, "Ride On" without Christians performing their full duty (Romans 12 and 13) to not only pray for government leaders, but to also always make them accountable for how they treat the least of these?

#### **V. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment**

- This year for Palm Sunday, why not facilitate a study on Romans Chapters 12 and 13? Provide copies of the U.S. Constitution and even the *Federalist* and *Antifederalist Papers* to understand the history and philosophy behind the creation of our republic. Be sure to discuss these documents in light of Jesus arriving in Jerusalem as a King of Peace with a certain agenda favoring the have-nots.
- <http://www.cbcfinc.org/> - This is the website for the Congressional Black Caucus of the House of Representatives. Its members continue the black political tradition of advocacy on behalf of the oppressed. Learn more about what they do and contact your local representative to find out how you can use politics to make a difference in your community.
- <http://www.opensecrets.org/> - This is the website site for the Center for Responsive Politics that offers important information on campaign financing. Learn how money affects who gains power and retains power in politics.

#### **Notes**

1. Brueggemann, Walter. The Message of the Psalms: a Theological Commentary. Augsburg Old Testament Studies. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. House, 1984. p. 25.
2. Blount, Brian K. True to Our Native Land an African American New Testament Commentary. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008. p. 111.

3. Crossan, John Dominic. God and Empire: Jesus against Rome, Then and Now. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2007. p. 132.
4. "Zekiel (Ezekiel Saw the Wheel)." Negro Spirituals. Online location: <http://www.negrospirituals.com/> accessed 19 December 2008
5. "Ride On King Jesus." Negro Spirituals. Online location: <http://www.negrospirituals.com/> accessed 19 December 2008
6. "Hosanna." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 2001. #224
7. Ibid. "There's Something About that Name." #301