

Parade or Demonstration?  
Craig Anderson

Mark 11:1-11 April 4, 2004

Was it a parade, or a demonstration? Think about it. First, and most obvious, if it was a parade, why did it end with an execution at Golgotha? That's not a typical outcome is it? I don't know about you, but after the Fourth of July parade out on East Main Street, I admire the old cars on the field and then head over to the firehouse for a beer. The kids meanwhile, get ready for hot dogs, sack races and tossing bean bags with a pie pan catapult. A public execution is the last thing we have in mind.

Furthermore, aren't parades officially sanctioned and planned in advance? There's a parade route. Marshals line up the floats, marching bands, and fire trucks. Convertibles are reserved for the politicians, oldest living resident, and the Grand Marshal. The cops are mostly smiling and directing traffic. Spectators line the route, grabbing places on the church steps and hauling lawn chairs to the edge of the road. Brunches are served at the finest homes on grand porches, sweeping lawns, or commodious driveways at least!

We know the drill. We've been going to parades since we were kids. But that's a problem when we hear the story from the Gospel of Mark, because we too readily picture a scene which may not comport with historical reality. Let me highlight a few verses from Mark which confound our usual view of the Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem.

“...they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!”

“...those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting...”

Do you jump off the curb or come down from the church steps to get out in front of your favorite float to lead it down the street? Or do you leave your quiche and fresh orange juice on a fence post, to follow the shiniest fire engine, trying to shout louder than the siren? No you don't. You remain in place. You clap gratefully for the rescue squad, and wave to friends and neighbors who march by. Kids gather up tossed candies. Adults wonder what the new town dump truck is costing the taxpayers, or they regret having sold that old 1959 Chevie; but nobody ever surrounds a float or public figure and piles down the road toward the Community Club keeping a wary eye out for Roman legionnaires.

Some of us here however, are of an age that besides parades, we also remember political protests and demonstrations. Those were more spontaneous weren't they? Often demonstrations flair up at a provocation. There may be bystanders, but no spectators in lawn chairs. One gets swept up in a demonstration. Demonstrators are actively supporting a cause, not passively watching the world go by. There is no fixed route. The authorities aren't waving from

convertibles. The cops are anxious about whether things are going to get out of hand. Their concern is containment, not illegally parked cars.

I'm persuaded that as Mark describes it, Palm Sunday sounds more like a demonstration, than a parade. Rather than a leisurely, organized march into the city, picture a potential mob scene. The legionnaires did. The political and religious authorities did. Given the unrest and violence which had marked Passover festivals in the recent past, festivals celebrating Israel's liberation from Egypt, officials knew better than to wade into the middle of a spontaneous protest. Indeed they waited until dark before acting. They held off until Jesus was in an isolated spot, away from the crowds.

Start with a parade on Sunday, and you'll never get to a reason for an execution on Friday. But start with a demonstration in a tense city jammed with pilgrims marking an earlier liberation from an oppressive regime, and you have a tinder box ready to explode. Listen to the chants and shouts of the demonstrators: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" The Legionnaires went from yellow to orange alert. These were nonsensical claims for someone mounted on a silly donkey. Perhaps they suppressed a smile, but they also gripped their weapons more tightly.

As this scene unfolded, as Dominic Crossan observes, "there was already one human being," who was "accepted by millions of people as Divine, son of God, God, and even God of God." Yes the empire already had one who was "hailed as Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, and even Savior of the World – the Roman emperor Octavian the Augustus." The little band going before and behind Jesus on the road to Jerusalem with hopes for liberation running high was on a collision course with an immovable force which imposed peace with power.

Couple Sunday's demonstration with a disturbance in the Temple, tables overturned, shouting and shoving; and by Friday the result is execution, which was the Empire's simple and effective way of saying, "don't do what this fellow did, or you'll end up like him."

And what again, to be absolutely clear, did he do? The coming kingdom envisioned, proclaimed and lived by Jesus, this other kingdom which stirred up excited crowds, and incited official repression was a polar opposite to the one presided over by Augustus. It was not a kingdom of peace based on power, but a kingdom of peace emerging through justice. In Oscar Wilde's poetic words, Jesus

"took the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain as his kingdom, and made of himself its eternal mouthpiece. Those who are dumb under oppression and whose silence is heard only of God, he chose as his brothers and sisters. He sought to become eyes to the blind, ears to the deaf, and a cry on the lips of those whose tongue had been tied."

And the empire killed him for it.

Nevertheless, the promise remains that we can participate in God's kingdom here and now, by submitting to God's will, and by resisting the everyday normalcy of civilized life, which

casually accepts war and oppression, child abuse and AIDS, starvation and dirty water, pollution and poverty, lies, deceptions and the destruction of the planet. But to challenge the status quo is still risky. Indeed, were Jesus to return today and again oppose what we weakly accept as necessary evils, he would once more, “be eliminated with extreme prejudice, publically, legally, and officially.” Palm Sunday demonstrations do not mark the opening of a week filled with cake and jelly beans. They signal the continuing need to profoundly challenge what the world accepts as normal, to become eyes to the blind and ears to the deaf, and to gather before and behind Jesus to declare that this world is not the one envisioned by God. We don’t need a parade, we need a protest.