

The ancient world out of which our Scriptures arose was a succession of mighty empires that swept across the Middle East. There had been the Egyptian Empire (1560-1069 BC), followed by the Assyrian Empire (1300-612 BC), after which came the Persian Empire (550-330 BC). But by far the greatest of them all was the Macedonian Empire (338-136 BC). This vast domain covered a swath of land occupying over five million square kilometres. It stretched from modern-day Greece eastwards through what are now Bulgaria and Romania, Turkey and Armenia, Iraq and Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, southwards through Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel, and across northern Africa through Egypt and Libya to the fringes of the Sahara Desert. It would not be exceeded in area even by the mighty Roman empire at its peak five centuries later. And all of this was the doing of one man: Alexander the Great, unquestionably one of the mightiest conquerors in all of history.

Now come to the city of Jerusalem in the year 331 BC. A message has arrived that Alexander himself would be paying a visit. To understand what this meant, you need to know that Jerusalem had refused to ally with Alexander as his armies battled against the Persian empire. So when they were brought the news that Alexander himself was coming to their city, its leading citizens began to spin into a frenzy, fearing the worst. They were certainly in no position to defend themselves, so they went to extravagant lengths to try to wow him and head off disaster.

Four centuries later the story was still being told. Here is what Jewish historian Josephus would write of that visit:

Jaddus the high priest, when he heard [the news of Alexander’s planned visit], was in an agony, and under terror, as not knowing how he should meet the Macedonians, since the king was displeased at his foregoing

disobedience. He therefore ordained that the people should make supplications, and should join with him in offering sacrifice to God, whom he besought to protect that nation, and to deliver them from the perils that were coming upon them. Whereupon God warned him in a dream ... that he should take courage, and adorn the city, and open the gates; that the rest should appear in white garments, but that he and the priests should meet the king in the habits proper to their order...

Josephus continues:

Alexander was not far from the city [when Jaddus the high priest] went out in procession, with the priests and the multitude of the citizens... When Alexander saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priests stood clothed with fine linen, and the high priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his mitre on his head ... he approached by himself ... and saluted the high priest. The Jews also did all together, with one voice, salute Alexander, and encompass him about...

Just try to picture the scene in all its grandeur: Standing at the gate, the high priest and his entourage robed in their finest ceremonial attire. Behind them stretches a numberless crowd all clothed in white. Even for a great conqueror such as Alexander it must have been an impressive sight.

Now let's move ahead three and a half centuries. Jerusalem is bustling with pilgrims from every corner of the known world, all preparing for the feast of Passover. It is likely that its population of less than 100,000 swelled to twice that amount on those occasions, so you can just imagine the chaos: narrow streets swarming with pilgrims, and having to elbow and jostle your way even to make the least progress to get anywhere.

At this point Jesus and the disciples are just outside the city proper, standing on the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives rises about three hundred feet above Jerusalem itself, so you can imagine the panoramic view they had of the city across the Kidron Valley. It was from there that Jesus gave instructions to two of his followers to bring him a donkey with her colt. And so, as the next scene unfolds, you can picture Jesus riding slowly down the hill towards the city gate.

Perhaps some people had already seen him coming from across the valley and begun to tell others. Soon what started out as a quiet entry into the city became a royal procession, as onlookers began to spread their cloaks along the dusty road, while others took branches they had cut from the trees and laid them on the ground. All the while people were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

It is amazing, even without social media like Facebook and Instagram and WhatsApp, how widely and rapidly news could travel in the ancient world. Maybe there were some who had heard of Jesus’ miracles along their way to the Passover festival. Perhaps others had even witnessed them themselves—the healing of ten lepers, the restoring of sight to a blind man, the astonishing change of heart to Zacchaeus the tax collector... Perhaps still others had heard his arresting parables about the lost sheep, or the prodigal son, or the rich man and the beggar Lazarus, or the Pharisee and the tax collector... And, while this would have aroused the animosity of some, there would have been more than a few who had found themselves being irresistibly attracted to this remarkable man.

But we move on now to another location, once again a short distance outside the walls of Jerusalem—but this time not the picturesque Mount of Olives, rather what was known as the Place of the Skull, Golgotha, the execution ground. It is five days later. Gone is the excitement of Palm Sunday. The cheers of “Hosanna!” are not even a faint echo anymore. Only days later they had given way to angry calls of “Crucify him!” Now even those shouts have faded into the eerie quietness of Calvary. Gone are the crowds, their places taken by a small cohort of Roman guards, a few of the religious officials and the occasional passerby. Not far away a few women and a teenage boy stand in grief-stricken silence.

In the end, though, it would not be the waving palms and the shouts of “Hosanna!” that would endure. No, it would be the cross of Calvary and the parched cry that continues to echo down the centuries: “Father, forgive them...”

A generation later a former persecutor of Jesus’ followers would write, “[Some] demand signs and [others] seek wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24) And again, “Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Galatians 6:14)

Which brings us to a third scene—and it is another palm procession, not on the dusty streets inside the gates of Jerusalem, but on the streets of gold in the holy city of God. It comes to us in the Book of Revelation:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,

standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.”

Today, as we begin our advent journey, we look ahead not only to the events of Good Friday and Easter, the celebrations of Christmas and the new year. We look beyond them to when you and I will gather with countless myriads of God’s people from every continent and century to rejoice before the throne of our crucified, risen, ascended and glorified Saviour. But that can happen only as we can speak with the Apostle Paul of the Saviour “who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Those words are reflected so beautifully in the song,

It was for me he cried, for me he died,
For me he shed his blood upon a tree.
It was for me he came, for me his shame;
For me, oh praise his name, it was for me.

And so let me ask: Have you stood at the foot of the cross? Have you looked up at the one hanging there and recognized that it was for you he suffered and bled and died—that it was your sins, your guilt, your death he took upon himself there? Praise be to the one who breaks the silence, who shines a light, a light the darkness cannot overcome. Amen.