

**Palm/Passion Sunday
March 16, 2008
St. David's**

"In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

"We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together."

President Dwight D. Eisenhower

Farewell address

January 17, 1961

It was, by most accounts, the greatest military industrial complex of all time. The Roman Empire of the first century controlled the entire world through a constant and persistent show of overwhelming force. It ruled the world utilizing a gigantic military that reveled in the use of unspeakable violence and incessant intimidation. It controlled people's actions and beliefs and subdued potential uprisings through barbaric displays of torture and death.

To remind its citizens and any potential insurrectionists of their power and their willingness to use it, the Romans publicly displayed their might and force on a regular basis. That is why they killed

political subversives in the manner you just heard. Crucifixion was the preferred methodology for at least two reasons. First, it was a slow, painful way to die, an effective deterrent for anyone who might be considering actions against the government. Second, anyone who had thoughts about carrying on their own political insurgency, was forced to walk by those people dying in such an agonizing fashion each day.

In addition to these overt displays of violence, Roman officials also carried out more subtle shows of force on a regular basis. You might call them shock and awe campaigns. Perhaps the most popular of these was the parade. Romans officials loved parades. They had them for every holiday and event imaginable. In them, they would march their military leaders into each city and town in the empire, following them up with throngs of horse mounted cavalry, thousands of armored soldiers carrying weapons of mass destruction. The parade was another tool to convince anyone who dared think of revolution, that they would be squashed like a bug if they even thought about it. Parades, like crucifixions, were used to control the masses.

It is in this context that Jesus and his disciples stage the event today that we just repeated outside. Instead of triumphantly entering

the city on a stallion like Roman military leaders, Jesus enters town on an ass. Instead of thousands of foot soldiers showing off their gleaming weapons, Jesus is followed by a handful of smelly fishermen, destitute widows and fallen women. Instead of greeting the military heroes with flowers thrown from buildings, the small band greeting Jesus wave dead palm branches they picked up off the desert floor.

What I believe Jesus and his disciples do today is put together the most effective demonstration in the history of the world. What they are doing in this kind of anti-parade is deliberately mocking a Roman government that believes combat and violence are the solution to every problem. What they are doing is presenting to the world a new kind of leadership, a leader who avoids pomp and circumstance, a leader who rules through a system of non-violence, creating a new vision of life where the dignity of everyone is upheld and embraced. They call this new system of government and the empire it would create, the kingdom of God.

The anti-procession in which they take part is deliberately sarcastic and provocative. It is anti-imperial, anti-Roman government, anti-triumphal and anti-violent. It is pro-justice, pro-compassion, and

pro-abundant life for all. There is no way possible then, that the Roman leaders can see this act as anything but subversive, leaving little doubt as to what they are going to do with Jesus.

But Jesus remains steadfast. He believes that the only way to end violence, to stop oppression, is to not participate in it. That approach to life however, is so counter-intuitive that not even Jesus' own disciples can live by it when their leader is arrested, as we just heard in the Passion reading. One of Jesus' disciples draws a sword and attacks in an attempt to save Jesus. But one last time, Jesus reminds them that his entire movement has to be about non-violence. "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

Whether it is the Roman empire, Jesus' disciples, defenders of religious traditions down through the ages, world super powers all the way down to America today, or any of us, it is all but impossible to not reach for our sword when we, or our way of life is threatened. But Jesus tells us that we must, we must stop once and for all, responding to violence with violence, no matter what the personal cost. We must learn, as he told us earlier in the Gospels, to turn the other cheek,

again and again and again. That approach to life continues to sound like the strategy of an idiot. Because as we all know, when we are in the midst of any violent encounter, it is obvious that violence always wins out, whether we are talking about the death of Jesus at the hands of a vicious empire, or radical terrorists in the 21st century world. But if that is really the case, let me ask you this. Why is it that 2000 years later, none of us remember any of those grandiose Roman parades, but we are re-enacting instead, the radical, broken down anti-march of a bunch of subversives?

How is it that no one can remember the overbearing British rulers of India in the 19th and 20th centuries, but everyone knows Gandhi? Why is it that even in our own generation, no one can remember the leader of El Salvador in 1980, but we all know Oscar Romero? How can it be that everyone has already forgotten the vicious leaders of South Africa in our own generation, but we all know Desmond Tutu?

By standing firmly and unequivocally for non-violence today, Jesus will lose his life. But he will also end the cycle of an eye for an eye and introduce us to a power that has so much more lasting effect than maiming and killing. It is a power that he proved to us can

change the world. But that can only happen if we too, have the courage to stand tall in the face of violent enemies and oppressors, and never pick up a sword and return the attack.

In 1961, as he was leaving office, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, a decorated war hero and general, recognized the similarity between what happened in first century Rome and what is going on in America today. We now live in a country that spends \$500 billion dollars a year on military expenditures, while spending \$16 billion on the poor.

As we enter together the most solemn and important week of the year in our tradition, let us consider our willingness to not just re-enact the anti-parade of Jesus, but to create our own counter processions, standing up against the violence and intimidation that continues to permeate our world.

As we contemplate and venerate the symbol of Jesus' death this week, may the cross be for us the symbol of ending that violence once and for all, so that we may live into the kingdom of God that Jesus died to bring about. Amen.