

A Beautiful Mind
Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11
March 16, 2008

Today the Christian Church remembers Jesus' royal welcome into Jerusalem. The red carpet, or rather green leafy branches and cloaks of the peasants were rolled out to greet him. Using the prophet Zechariah to describe this scene, Matthew has two animals, a donkey and a colt, prepared to carry Jesus. Zechariah is quoted as proclaiming, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Jesus entered the city from the east, descending from the Mount of Olives. His followers were peasants, just as he was from the peasant village of Nazareth. The crowd's shouts of acclamation and carpet of cloaks are reminiscent of jubilant royal entrances and processions of King Solomon, the beloved King of Israel who built the Temple in Jerusalem. The cry, "Hosanna," was originally a prayer meaning, "Save, we beseech you," but by the first century it became a festive shout, more like a religious "hurrah."

At the same time, on the opposite side of the city, from the west, another procession entered Jerusalem. The imperial procession was led by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, followed by a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. It was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals. They were not participating in the religious rituals, but were present in case there was trouble. This was often the case at Passover, the festival that celebrates the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire. Imagine the sights and sounds of the imperial procession: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums.

Pilate's procession was not only a display of imperial power, but also of Roman imperial theology. The emperor was considered not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God. This understanding began with the greatest of the emperors, Augustus, who ruled Rome from 31 BCE to 14 CE. His father was the god Apollo, who conceived him in his mother, Atia. Inscriptions refer to Augustus as "son of God," "lord" and "savior," one who had brought "peace on earth." After his death, he was seen ascending into heaven to take his permanent place among the gods.ⁱ

Remember what the peasant crowd on the other side of the city is shouting as Jesus passes through, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

The passage from Zechariah quoted by Matthew further describes the type of king this man riding on the donkey will be: "He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations" (Zechariah 9:10). This king will banish war and bring peace on earth.

These two processions illustrate two different worldviews. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God. The final week of Jesus' life is a confrontation between these two kingdoms.

Two thousand years after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, another visitor came to the city, Germany's last Kaiser, Wilhelm II. His entourage was so grand that he had to have the Jaffe

Gate in the old city widened so that his over-sized carriage could pass through. After the parade had ended, someone climbed up and attached a large sign to the gate. The sign read, “A better man than Wilhem came through this city’s gate. He rode on a donkey.”ⁱⁱ

What made Jesus a better man? What was it that compelled the people to spread their cloaks and wave their branches to hail him as king? What is it about Jesus that still inspires millions of people to give their lives to him and even for him? It was his beautiful mind, which was nothing less than the mind of God. Paul writes eloquently in his letter to the church at Philippi: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant and humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Jesus’ beautiful mind moved him not to abuse his God-given power, but to relinquish power in order to identify with the powerless. His mind was not disconnected from his heart, which was marked by compassion, by an ability to suffer with others.

Jesus’ beautiful mind led him to take on the identity of a slave who was dishonored and lacked common privileges. Instead of claiming the status and privileges of equality with God, Jesus deliberately chose to share fully in our human existence, even to the point of suffering the cruel and shameful death of crucifixion inflicted upon slaves.

Jesus’ beautiful mind was humble. The author of the fourteenth century classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* interprets humility as having a proper self-estimate.ⁱⁱⁱ Those who are humble have an appropriate awareness of their humanity, finiteness, and sinfulness in contrast to God’s overwhelming love and goodness. The difference leaves no grounds for boasting.

Jesus’ beautiful mind was obedient to God. To obey is to listen. Jesus’ listened deeply to God and obeyed the will of God as he understood it. As is typical of humans, he wrestled with God’s desires, especially in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want” (Matthew 26:39b). Jesus listened so intently to God’s desire that he lived as God willed.

This was the beautiful mind of Jesus: compassionate, service-oriented, humble, and obedient to God.

The mind to which Paul refers is not simply knowledge. It is a mindset of how one sees oneself, one’s brothers and sisters, the world, and God. Our view of reality impacts our behavior and relationships. Think of the different paths we are led down by the mindsets of competition versus mutual love. In competition we seek to best the opposition, to end up the winner, to come out on top, over the other. In mutual love there is “give and take,” reciprocity, an appreciation of the other and of oneself.

Theologian William Placher uses an illustration from the world of basketball. He writes, “In basketball the players who are always asking, ‘How am I doing? Am I getting my share of the shots?’ are the ones who never reach their full potential. It is the players who lose themselves who find themselves. And it’s that kind of self-forgetfulness that makes the best players.”^{iv}

Jesus invites us into the paradox of faith. Paul offers us powerful images of the great paradox: Servant King, Human Deity, Humble Lord, Crucified God.

Roger Martin, a business school dean in Toronto, urges us to have an opposable mind. We are familiar with opposable thumbs. They enable our hands to do things that are impossible for other creatures: write, thread needles, paint, sculpt, perform intricate surgical procedures. Martin contends that we have a capacity to hold two conflicting ideas in constructive tension; through that tension we can think our way into new and superior ideas. He says, “Just as we can develop and refine the skill with which we employ our opposable thumbs to perform tasks that once seemed impossible, I’m convinced we can also, with patient practice, develop the ability to use our opposable minds to unlock solutions to problems that seem to resist every effort to solve them.”^v

Our world has become so immersed in oppositional thinking that is we are caught in destructive webs. The mind of Christ invites us to opposable thinking that patiently holds our own views in a deeper tension with alternative possibilities, compelling us to find new patterns, patterns that are consistent with Jesus’ own life and teaching. With opposable thinking we can better understanding and even follow the radical and paradoxical ideas of a Servant King, a Human Deity, a Humble Lord, a Crucified God.

We can cultivate the mind of Christ by rejoining our roles in life with our hidden souls. Quaker educator Parker Palmer notes that the roles we play in life in order to succeed or survive have become detached from our souls, the core of pure being. We live divided lives. We disappear into our roles and lose touch with our souls.

He tells the story of one participant in a retreat he facilitated for twenty elected and appointed officials from Washington, D.C. “All of them had gone into government animated by an ethic of public service, all were experiencing painful conflicts between their values and power politics, and all sought support for the journey toward living ‘divided no more.’

“One participant had worked for a decade in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, after farming for twenty-five years in northeastern Iowa. On his desk at that moment was a proposal related to the preservation of Midwestern topsoil, which is being depleted at a rapid rate by agribusiness practices that value short-term profits over the well-being of the earth. His ‘farmer’s heart,’ he kept saying, knew how the proposal should be handled. But his political instincts warned him that following his heart would result in serious trouble, not least with his immediate supervisor.

“On the last morning of our gathering, the man from Agriculture, looking bleary-eyed, told us that it had become clear to him during a sleepless night that he needed to return to his office and follow his farmer’s heart.

“After a thoughtful silence, someone asked him, ‘How will you deal with your boss, given his opposition to what you intend to do?’

“‘It won’t be easy,’ replied this farmer-turned-bureaucrat. ‘But during this retreat, I’ve remembering something important: I don’t report to my boss. I report to the land.’”^{vi}

We cultivate the mind of Christ, the beautiful mind, the godly mind, when we listen to our own soul deep within, when we seek God’s desire for our lives and the common good. Palmer writes: “The soul is generous: it takes in the needs of the world. The soul is wise: it suffers without shutting down. The soul is hopeful: it engages the world in ways that keep opening our hearts. The soul is creative: it finds a path between realities that might defeat us and fantasies

that are mere escapes. All we need to do is to bring down the wall that separates us from our own souls and deprives the world of the soul's regenerative powers."^{vii}

The soul is generous, wise, hopeful, and creative. The mind of Jesus is compassionate, service-oriented, humble, and obedient to God. Living an undivided life in which our role is congruent with our soul is not easy, as the man from Agriculture learned. Nor is living with the mind of Christ easy, as Jesus shows. But we are not called to easy lives; we are called to lives of faithfulness.

May we cultivate the mind of Christ and faithfully follow the will of God for our lives, as did the humble servant Jesus.

ⁱ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), pp. 2-5.

ⁱⁱ Joanna Adams, "A Beautiful Mind," March 19, 2005, www.day1.net, retrieved March 10, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. By Evelyn Underhill (London: John M. Watkins, 1956), p. 100ff. Referenced by E. Glenn Hinson, "Having the Mind of Christ," *Weavings*, Vol. XII, No. 2, March/April 1997, p. 19.

^{iv} William Placher, *Narratives of A Vulnerable God*, quoted by Joanna Adams, *ibid*.

^v Roger Martin, *The Opposable Mind*, quoted by L. Gregory Jones, "Of two minds," *Christian Century*, March 25, 2008, p. 35.

^{vi} Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 18-19.

^{vii} *Ibid*, p. 184.

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