

King Richard the 1st, of England, earned the nickname Lionheart because of his courage in battle. He was a fearsome warrior, led a crusading army to the Holy Land to try to recapture Jerusalem, and he very nearly succeeded. But there were divisions in the ranks, which caused the crusade to fall apart, and it led to the King's return home, which was when his adventure really began.

Passing through Germany in disguise, eventually his identity was uncovered, and the German Emperor Henry VI threw him into prison. Henry declared he wouldn't let Richard go until the people of England were able to pay the staggering sum of 150,000 marks. At today's price of silver, that would be around \$17 million. It was, literally, a king's ransom. And when the king is in prison, the people are the ones who pay the price.

All over England, money was collected to buy King Richard out of his jail cell. Taxes were increased by 25%. Gold and silver treasures from cathedrals and abbeys were melted down. Eventually, when there was enough coin for his ransom, King Richard went free, and his return home has been celebrated as the final scene of practically every Robin Hood movie ever made.

Now this morning, as we celebrate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, we recall that he too was hailed as a king. And, like Richard the Lionheart, Jesus would soon be imprisoned. And yet for Jesus, there was no ransom — neither asked for nor offered. Instead, he was hauled before the chief priests and the scribes, and eventually before the Roman governor, Pilate.

In today's passion narrative we observe that Jesus didn't cut a very kingly figure in Pilate's courtyard. The guards stripped him and beat him. They shouted insults at him, mocked him with their insincere bowing and saluting, and the only crown he wore was woven from thorns.

Pilate, being a practical sort of politician, saw no advantage in treating Jesus as a visiting head of state, despite what the people had been calling him as he

entered the city. And one has to wonder that if there had been anyone willing (or able) to raise a king's ransom for Jesus, the governor might have taken a different approach. But the humble country rabbi who rode into town on a colt, described in Matthew as the "foal of a donkey," had nothing.

As far as Pilate was concerned, Jesus was just a troublemaker and an insurrectionist. In fact, during his reign Pilate had learned to nip Judean revolutionary movements in the bud. And so, he offered the mob a wickedly cruel choice: they could free Jesus or the bandit, Barabbas, and in their mob mentality the crowd chose a murderer and insurrectionist over the man who should have been their true King, which led Jesus to the cross.

Everything had been so drastically different just a few days before. The sun was shining, the crowds were cheering, and the people were running to catch a glimpse of Christ, calling out: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!" Which may cause us to wonder, what was on Jesus' mind that day, as he allowed the people to make such a fuss over him?

After all, he didn't contradict them, saying, "I'm not the King you're looking for." On the contrary, he let the demonstration go on. He received their cries of adulation. He let the people lay their cloaks down in the road before him, a gesture of deference offered only to those of the highest rank. He let them go on waving palm branches, a politically provocative act that often celebrated the anointing of a King or the victory of a military conquest.

But the demonstration at the city gate was clearly not seen as a serious invasion of a Roman-held territory. Jesus had no army following behind him. He wore no olive wreath of victory on his brow. He wasn't riding a mighty war-horse, nor steering a chariot as you might expect a conquering hero to do.

Instead, he was perched atop a donkey, like some country bumpkin, his feet almost dragging along the ground. And donkeys don't always go in a straight line.

Sometimes they stop altogether, dig in their heels, and have to be prodded along. Very likely, there may have been a bit of laughter in the crowd, as they watched the Nazarene rabbi make his zigzag way down the street.

And yet, Jesus knew what he was doing. He was making it clear that he was no high-and-mighty general. He was a man of the people, and everyone could see that. But he was also doing something else that day. He was likely making fun of the powers-that-be. He was gently mocking them.

In fact, Jesus' triumphal entry has been called by some scholars as an exercise in revolutionary street theater. Everybody back then knew what a kingly parade looked like. The Romans specialized in that sort of spectacle. Pontius Pilate himself undoubtedly climbed into a chariot at regular intervals and showed off the power he maintained to his troops.

Everyone knew about the victory parades the Romans liked to mount after vanquishing their enemies. Those parades were famous for their pageantry. There were thousands of soldiers, marching rank-on-rank. And each unit of men marched behind an imperial standard, a symbol perched high atop a pole.

Yes, the Romans knew their parades. Shrewdly, they used them to display imperial power and glory. Remember, they lived in a world without newspapers, television, or the Internet. News spread, mostly by word of mouth, and a densely populated city like Jerusalem filled with religious pilgrims was a hotbed for rumor and intrigue.

The Romans knew a parade was an effective way to co-opt this process and get control of the messaging. And usually, the message was simple: *We* are in command here. *We* are the masters. The emperor in Rome has power and glory like unto a god, and we are his chosen emissaries. Jesus and his little demonstration upon entering Jerusalem was not seen as a competition against Rome, for Pilate

sent no soldiers to bar his way. It was a minor disturbance, a little kerfuffle off at the edge of the city.

No doubt, though, information about the crowd's fanfare toward Jesus' would have eventually made its way up the chain of command to the governor's palace. The name of Jesus of Nazareth would have been duly noted. And the next day, when the Lord caused a disturbance at the temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers and driving out the animals, that would have been noted as well. Jesus' rap sheet was growing longer by the day. Something would have to be done about him, and soon.

For Richard the Lionheart, the people pay the king's ransom. For Jesus, they do not. Quite the opposite, in fact. When he needs someone to step up and help him, no one does. Not even Peter, his closest friend.

Jesus was not a conquering king, riding into the city in triumph. No, he was the Suffering Servant king, mentioned by the Prophet Isaiah: one who "sets his face like flint, who lays down his life for his subjects." Every other king would dispatch soldiers into battle — to fight for his honor, and the honor of the nation. Christ the Servant king enters the battlefield — the city of Jerusalem — alone and unarmed, riding an animal of peace.

Every other king plays the high-stakes game of thrones. Jesus is disarmingly simple and direct. He says what he means, and he means what he says. Every other king seeks to argue from a position of strength. The Lord was one who seemed to deliberately seek out a posture of humility. Jesus was a peculiar sort of king indeed! No wonder Pilate is baffled when Jesus finally stands before him, uttering barely a word in his own defense!

Eventually Pilate will admit, at the conclusion of the trial in John's Gospel, "I find no case against him." Now, at that point — in a fair trial — any judge worth his salt would bang the gavel and declare, "Case dismissed." But we all know

Pilate will do nothing of the sort. The man is utterly corrupt, a tyrant who loves power above all else and manipulates the law — and human lives — whenever it suits him. This is why he puts the choice to the crowd. I will free one prisoner for you, Jesus or Barabbas. Which will it be?

Unfortunately, the ruckus that Jesus raised at the temple was far more serious than his little donkey-parade. Flipping over the tables of the moneychangers was a provocative act of reform that threatened the whole temple system. It turned the ultra-orthodox — religious leaders and especially the temple authorities — against Jesus. Not that Pilate cared much for the temple system. But he did care about his relationship with the temple authorities. He needed their cooperation to govern the unruly Jewish people.

So, there's was no ransom for Jesus. No one's willing to stand up on his behalf. But what Pilate doesn't know — what no one knows, not even Jesus' closest disciples — is that a king's ransom *is* being paid, but it's being paid in reverse. Not **for** Christ, but **by** him. The ones who are ransomed are you, me, the entire world. And the price is the king's own blood.

So let us wave our palms. Let us sing our hymns of victory. Let us cheer his triumphal entry. But let us also be aware that, between the hosannas of Palm Sunday, and the alleluias of Easter, there is an arrest, a flogging, a trial — and a cross. And let us remember and be grateful for Christ's love, his mercy, his grace, and for Jesus paying a ransom that should have been ours. Thanks be to God. Amen.