

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

In 1985, a group of progressive theologians founded the 'Jesus Seminar' with the intent to study the person and teachings of Jesus by thinking outside the box. Among the most prominent and influential members of that self-selected group have been Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossen. In 2006 they published a book together titled The Last Week, which constructed a day-by-day recounting of Jesus' last days in Jerusalem. I have met Borg a couple of times, and I must confess, I find his conclusions about the nature and mission of Jesus to be 'way too controversial. But, if you like to have your belief structure challenged, then I guess I would recommend this book. Their description of the Palm Sunday procession has become very well known, and it is, in fact, a very powerful and provocative image.

Jesus has been drawn to Jerusalem, in part by destiny, but also in part to demonstrate against the Romans and the High Priest. He establishes a base camp among protective friends in the town of Bethany, to which he returns each evening. Meanwhile, some 50 miles away on the Mediterranean coast, the occupying Romans had built the new city of Caesarea, much preferable to the dusty inland city of Jerusalem. Pilate lived there by the sea, and had a large garrison of troops, as well as all the modern conveniences Roman civilization could afford. The upcoming week was the celebration of the Passover, a religious holiday, to be sure, but also a festival not to be missed. Jerusalem was full of tourists and travelers, the pious and the lawless alike, all hoping for their own reasons to be where the action was.

It was Pilate's practice, during such celebrations, to lead a cohort of his Roman soldiers, on horseback, to Jerusalem to strengthen the troops permanently garrisoned there. They would ride into town through a northwestern gate, in full armor, spears and swords on display, as a deterrent to insurrection and crime. It must have been quite a sight: banners waving, sunlight gleaming off bronze and steel, the intimidating sound of the warhorses' hoof beats, the creak of leather and the clang of bridle straps, the scowls of the soldiers who looked down disparagingly, disgustedly, silently, from lofty height on the civilians in the streets. It was a deliberate display of power and order in a city full of chaos, and its purpose was arguably not so much to dampen the enthusiasm of the festival; that would have been a wasted effort. No, the show of strength would have the effect of keeping the populace off-balance, unsure about how and when that lethal strength might arbitrarily be used.

The result would not be calmness, but heightened anxiety, especially among those, like Jesus' disciples who were pushing the envelope of civil disobedience and religious heresy. By

that Thursday evening when, say Borg and Crossen, Jesus was intercepted in Gethsemane on his way home to Bethany, the disciples are hardly themselves for all the fear and anxiety which have been swirling around them in the streets of the metropolis. These are rural lads from the backcountry of Galilee, probably uncomfortable with city ways to begin with. Poor Peter, despite his earlier vows to do otherwise, he denies even knowing Jesus three times before the rooster crows. Might we have done the same?

Was it Jesus' plan on that Palm Sunday to parody the intimidating entrance of the Roman soldiers? His route from Bethany would have brought him through the Kidron valley to a southeastern gate, on the opposite side of town. Surrounded by a protective crowd of followers, who had collected, as Mark says, leafy branches in the fields on the way, Jesus planned to ride into Jerusalem on a humble donkey, no armor, no weapons, no arrogance. Just the promise of a new, just, and compassionate kingdom, in contrast to all oppressive and corrupt worldly empires. In the week to come, Jesus will return to Jerusalem from Bethany each day to build upon this demonstration, courageously defying civil, military, and religious authority. The magnificent strength the Roman soldiers had brought with them from Caesarea was dedicated to holding the status quo, while the one who comes in the name of the Lord seeks to change the world. Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest