“A King’s Ransom”

John 12:12-16

The people paid $17 million for Richard the Lionheart. For Jesus, they paid nothing.

“Lionheart.” King Richard I of England earned that name because of his courage in battle. He was a fearsome warrior and led a crusading army to the Holy Land to try to recapture Jerusalem. He very nearly succeeded.

But there were divisions in the ranks, and the Third Crusade fell apart. The French and the Germans didn’t get along with the English. King Richard left for home, and it was then his adventure really began.

Passing through Germany in disguise, his identity was uncovered. The German Emperor Henry VI threw him into prison. Henry declared he wouldn’t let Richard go until the people of England had raised 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. When the king is in prison, the people pay the price.

All over England, money was collected to buy King Richard out of prison. Taxes were increased by 25%. Gold and silver treasures from cathedrals and abbeys were melted down.

Finally, there was enough. King Richard went free, and his return home has been celebrated as the final scene of every Robin Hood movie ever made.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he too was hailed as a king. And, like Richard the Lionheart, Jesus would soon be imprisoned.

Yet for Jesus, there was no ransom — neither asked for nor offered. They hauled him before the chief priests and the scribes, and eventually before the Roman governor, Pilate.

Jesus didn't cut a very kingly figure in Pilate's courtyard. They had stripped him and beaten him. 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. Had there been anyone willing (or able) to raise a king's ransom for him, the governor might have taken a different approach. But this country rabbi who rode into town on a donkey had nothing. As far as Pilate was concerned, he was just a troublemaker and insurrectionist. Pilate had learned to nip these Judean revolutionary movements in the bud. And so, he offered the mob that cruel choice: Jesus or the bandit, Barabbas. They chose Barabbas. King Jesus went to the cross.

It had all looked so different just a few days before. The sun was shining, the crowds were cheering, and the people were running to catch a glimpse of him, calling out: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!"

What was on Jesus' mind that day, as he allowed the people to make such a fuss over him? He didn't contradict them, saying, "I'm not the King you're looking for." No, he let the demonstration go on. He received the cries of adulation. He let the people lay their cloaks down in the road before him, a gesture offered only to those of the highest rank. He let them go on waving palm branches, a politically provocative act, because palm branches had been the symbol of the Maccabean rebellion a century before. That revolt had succeeded for a brief time in throwing the foreign overlords out of Jerusalem.

But this demonstration at the city gate was clearly not a serious invasion of Roman-held territory. Jesus had no army following behind him. He wore no olive wreath of victory.

He wasn't riding a mighty war-horse, nor steering a chariot as you might expect a conquering hero to do.

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 was laughter in the crowd, as they watched this Nazarene rabbi make his zigzag way down the street.

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. 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.

Jesus' triumphal entry has been called 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 of 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. You could hear them coming a long way off, with the beat of drums, the blare of trumpets, and the thunderous footfalls of legions marching row upon row. Each unit of men marched behind an imperial standard, a symbol perched high atop a pole. Often, that symbol was a brass or gilded Roman eagle displaying the letters "SPQR" — Latin initials that stood for "The Senate and the People of Rome."

Back towards the end of the procession, there were huge war horses — snorting, stamping wild-eyed beasts bred for the battlefield.

They looked like they could break free of their reins any minute and start trampling passersby. Riding atop one of those horses, or maybe standing in a chariot being pulled along by two or three of them, was a Roman general. He wore a breastplate, polished to such a sheen that it reflected the sun. His equally shiny helmet was set aside for now, and his brow was crowned instead with an olive wreath, the symbol of triumph.

If this were a real victory parade — with battle-hardened troops returning from a campaign — there would be prisoners of war in the procession, as well. These miserable wretches had their hands tied behind their backs, as mean-looking soldiers prodded them onward at spear-point. The prisoners were unkempt, dressed in rags. They had the wild look of a hunted animal in their eyes. They knew they were not long for this world, for moments after the parade ended, their purpose for living would be ended, too. Then, it would be a sword slashed across their throats, a rope twisted tight about their necks, or maybe a swift, hard blow to the back of the head — and after that, oblivion.

Yes, the Romans knew their parades. Shrewdly, they used them to display imperial power and glory. Remember, this was a world in which there were no newspapers, no TV or Internet. News spread slowly, mostly by word of mouth. A city like Jerusalem, with its narrow streets and alleys, was a hotbed of rumor and intrigue. On the bench outside the wine merchant's shop, in the line of worshipers waiting to enter the temple precincts, beside the well as women filled their clay jars with water, the latest news spread like a virus, from one person to another.

The Romans knew a parade was an effective way to co-opt this process and get control of the messaging.

The good folk of Jerusalem would be going about their business, when suddenly they'd hear the drums, trumpets and marching feet, and they'd quickly run to see what was happening — to hear what the Roman overlords wanted them to know.

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.

It was effective. The Romans may not have said, "All the world's a stage," but their parades — effective stage presentations that they were — bore the unmistakable message: "All the world is Rome's."

Jesus' little demonstration was no competition for the Roman machine — as seen by the fact that Pilate sent no soldiers to bar his way. It was a minor disturbance.

No doubt there were informers in the crowd. Word eventually filtered up the chain of command to the governor's palace. The name of Jesus of Nazareth would have been duly noted. And when, the next day, this same Jesus caused a disturbance outside the temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers and driving off the sacrificial beasts that were for sale, that would have been noted as well — especially by the temple authorities, who saw it as an act bordering on sacrilege. 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. When he needs someone to step up and help him, no one does. Not even Peter, his closest friend.

This is not the conquering king, riding into the city in triumph. No, this is a Suffering Servant king, after the pattern of those famous "servant songs" of Isaiah: one who "sets his face like flint," then lays down his life for his subjects.

Every other king dispatches soldiers into battle — to fight for his honor, and the honor of the nation. This 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. This one 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. This one seems to deliberately seek out a posture of weakness.

A peculiar sort of king indeed, this Jesus of Nazareth. No wonder Pilate's baffled when Jesus finally stands before him, uttering barely a word in his own defense!

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* him, but *by* him. The ones who are ransomed are you and me. 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, and a flogging, and a trial — and a cross. Let us remember and be grateful.

May the peace of God . . .

#343 – My Song is Love Unknown