

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Many years ago, I took a kind of secret pride in the fact that Cardinal Krol told me that I was the youngest pastor he had ever appointed. When I announced to the Church where I had served as assistant pastor, that I would now be the pastor, I also told them there would be no assistant appointed. I told them, "I'm all you've got!" From the middle of the congregation a booming voice shouted out "And you ain't much!" Have you ever noticed? Life is full of humbling experiences.

A more humble man than Jesus of Nazareth has never been born. That is the essence of today's Good News! On the one hand, we see that no one greater than he ever lived. Yet, no one ever emptied himself more completely of pride and arrogance than Jesus. As St. Paul tells us today, "Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

This thing we call humility is truly the key to greatness. This is so important for us to understand. If you think about it, some of the greatest people who ever lived have viewed themselves as servants, and they have blessed our world.

There was an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer some years ago about a 14 year old Jewish girl at the end of World War II who was discovered lost, alone, and barely alive lying on the platform of an abandoned railroad station. It was the day the Russian army liberated a Nazi concentration camp where she was held captive.

Though she was free she was half-starved and too exhausted to pick herself up off the ground. She thought she would die there. But then a young man came beside her. He offered her tea, two slices of bread, and some cheese. "Where do you want to go?" he asked. "Krakow," she managed to reply. "I'm going there too," he said. "Let me help you up." He tried to lift Edith to her feet, but she collapsed. So he picked her up and literally carried her two miles to the train to Krakow. "What is your name?" he asked. "Edith Zirer," she said. "My name is Karol," her rescuer told her. When they arrived in Krakow, they were separated and they never saw each other again; until the year, 2000.

In Jerusalem, at the Holocaust memorial, Edith Zirer, with tears in her eyes, clasped the hands of a Polish priest named Karol, whom the world had come to know as Pope John Paul II, and now known as St. John Paul II. The Pope had performed that quiet act of service lifting up and carrying this poor Holocaust survivor and had forgotten it. But Edith didn't. Before the whole world she declared, "He came like an angel out of nowhere and gave me life. He saved me. There's no other word for it. It's thanks to him that I'm here today." Then, Edith quoted a verse from the Talmud, which says, "To save one life is to save the world."

Sometimes when we think of the pope we associate him with the pomp and circumstance of his lofty office, the magnificence of St. Peter's Basilica, and the splendor of Rome. We forget that many of our modern popes, including our beloved Pope Francis, have had the hearts of servants. All greatness grows out of humility and service.

Today it is worth noting that on that first Palm Sunday, according to some theologians and Biblical scholars, there were two processions in Jerusalem. We see Jesus riding on a small donkey, accompanied by his followers coming from the north into Jerusalem. The far larger and more spectacular procession entered Jerusalem from the west.

Like the Roman governors of Judea before him, Pontius Pilate lived in Caesarea by the sea. He spent most of his time at his seaside palace. But with crowds of devout Jews flowing into Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, Pilate put on a display of force. After all, Passover commemorates the Jews' deliverance from the rule of Pharaoh. Pilate didn't want them to get any ideas about similar liberation from Rome.

When Pilate entered Jerusalem with his army, his aim was to prevent any possibility of rebellion. So Pilate came to Jerusalem with his cavalry on horseback, followed by chariots and charioteers, followed by armored and helmeted foot soldiers carrying weapons and banners with golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. There was the beating of drums, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, and the stomping of hundreds of marching feet.

No one shouted, "Hosanna!" (the Hebrew word which means "Save us"), as Pilate rode his magnificent stallion, surrounded by a regiment of his most trusted soldiers, with the intent of striking fear and intimidation in the hearts of the resentful onlookers.

So, there was the procession of Pilate, ready and willing, without exception, to take the life of anyone who dared to challenge his authority. Then, there was Jesus, ready and willing, without exception, to lay down his life for the least and the lowest. No contrast could be starker. While Pilate processed into town with a showcase of intimidating muscle and glinting armor astride a noble steed, Jesus processed unarmed, unflanked, on the back of a borrowed donkey.

It's amazing how easy it is for us to be beckoned to join the parade of glory and power and might; to believe that force and strength and violence can somehow be the better way to follow. That is the parade offered by Pilate.

Last evening I found out just how easy it is to jump on Pilate's band wagon. As I was preparing for the 5:00 o'clock Mass, a man came in the sacristy to tell me his granddaughter would be speaking on behalf of Birthright after Communion. Taken by surprise, I said that I didn't know what he was talking about. I told him, "I don't know what this is all about. No one said anything to me. So, tell her she will not be speaking." Then, I walked to the back of the Church and asked her myself who had told her to speak. She explained it was for our Life Teen's "Baby Shower" that they were conducting for the babies and young mothers cared for by Birthright. I said, "Well I don't know anything about it. Maybe after Easter you can give your talk."

Even as I was preaching this message my own words convicted me. I had jumped on Pilate's bandwagon. This poor girl had prepared her talk and was nervous about delivering it in the first place. Then, I came along and used the power of my position to tell her she couldn't do what she had been appointed to do.

I had allowed myself to get in the wrong parade by using my position to stifle the initiative, not just of the young girl, but of the good work being done by our Life Teen for those in need. My sin was a sin of pride that had me put position before persons and good works. And it was my own foolish arrogance that led me to tell Mia she couldn't speak. Grace led me to realize that I had joined Pilate's parade.

Throughout the Mass guilt and shame kept pressing in upon me. After Communion I confessed my sins to the congregation and asked their pardon and begged Mia's forgiveness, and asked her to please deliver her message. I wanted to get back into Jesus' parade.

Jesus invites us to follow his way of courageous love, humble service, and identifying with the poor, the broken, the displaced, and the unwanted.

This Palm Sunday we are called upon to make a choice; a choice we have to make again and again—which parade will we follow—the one that instills fear and intimidation with power and might or the one that calls us to humble and sacrificial service?

A POSTSCRIPT In discussing this homily with a parishioner, he said, "Well, I don't have to worry about that happening to me. I don't have any power or position." I told him, "You're kidding yourself. You are a husband and a father. You have a truly powerful position in the life of your family." Parents, Spouses, please recognize the power that you possess. Use it wisely, gently, and with great compassion and understanding. It will make a tremendous difference in the life of your family.