

Palm Sunday: Year C—April 2, 2023

All Saints', Littleton

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Liturgy of Palms—Mark 11: 1-11

Isaiah 50: 4-9A

Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2: 5-11

Matthew 26: 14-46

And so it begins! [10am: Waving our palms and literally walking into the sanctuary, we figuratively walk into Holy Week.] This week is always a rollercoaster of emotions—the joy and sense of power and victory in the procession into Jerusalem, the intimate but confusing gathering of the last supper—what did he mean by all that!, the horror of arrest, trial, and crucifixion, and the wondrous mystery of Holy Saturday bleeding life back into the dead in the wee hours of the morning!

We began today with our proclamation shouting ‘Hosanna’, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’ At the beginning of this deeply political week in Jerusalem and Palestine, the people greet Jesus with the ‘Hosanna’, which means ‘save now’ or ‘save us, we pray’, which for them was very much a greeting they hoped they were giving to a messiah that would liberate them from Rome. And we should remember that they also came out to see the one who raised Lazarus from the dead—the story from gospel last week. This would have had Jerusalem buzzing....and remembering the prophecy from Ezekiel that said the messiah would ‘open their graves’.

And what about the cloaks and palms? Well in 2 Kings there is a passage where military commanders threw down their cloaks for the approaching King to honor him—note, ‘military commanders’. And the palms were a reference to the Jewish feast of Succoth, or the ‘feast of booths’, a feast that is celebrated still today with people cutting branches from Palms and trees and making temporary shelters in their backyard to remember the temporary shelter of the sojourn of their people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Part of the celebration is also to cut branches of palm and parade around the temple—again a reference to Exodus and salvation. And

Pilate and the Roman soldiers would have had a sharp eye on all these goings on.

And what of ‘blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord’—“Baruch haba hashem Adonai”. This ‘blessed is he who comes’ is actually a common Jewish idiom of welcome, and used to greet the groom at weddings when he approaches the chuppah, the wedding canopy held over bride and groom, but in this case it was especially tinged with messianic hope.

And what of the story we read at the beginning of the service in the gospel of Mark was how he acquired a foal of a donkey and rode into Jerusalem on it. He was aware of the prophecy about the messiah coming in such a way from the ninth chapter of Zechariah.

So, now we can better understand how the adoring crowds grew fickle over the course of the week and by Friday they were demanding his death. They were definitely looking for a military leader and liberator, but Jesus didn’t even put up a fight in his arrest and told his disciples to put their swords away. Jesus was a big disappointment to them and they turned on him. There certainly was a tug of war between two Jewish political factions, the zealots and the Sanhedrin, who saw salvation—vis-à-vis Rome—in different ways. But a new kingdom was breaking in on them that neither the zealots or the religious establishment understood.

The gospel lesson this morning takes us from the last supper through Peter’s betrayal. All of this is foretaste of the week to come. In the account of the meal, Jesus foretells of the betrayals and desertions. They argue with him. Then they go out to the garden of Gethsemane and he prayed that ‘this cup’ might pass from him, and the disciples fall asleep. Three times he comes back only to find them sleeping. Please note the subtle contrast: Jesus is praying and therefore ‘awake’, and the disciples give up prayer and continually fall ‘asleep’. And then he announces the betrayer is at hand.

I also rather like that we have this great reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians today. Paul wrote this to the church in Philippi, essentially what became one of the first churches in Europe, while he was in prison. Scholars believe parts of this passage were a very early hymn about Christ.

When you study Christology—how Jesus became known as the ‘Christ’—one often thinks that the notion of Christ being with the Creator from the beginning belongs to later development of high Christology in the Patristics era, but here, clearly and early on, was a notion of Christ’s pre-existence with God. And the import of this early hymn and belief was all about his humility—‘taking the form of a servant’, and humbled himself ultimately to death on the cross. The Greek word here about this self-sacrificing love is *kenosis*—and this kenotic way is the core of Jesus message and example to us. Throughout this whole week, over and over again, he contrasts his ‘kingdom’ and way of being in the world with what they know and expect. The religious leaders and Pilate stumble over this too.

This is a good preface for all of the events of Holy Week. And Christ is our model. When we walk with him, when we seek him out, when we understand in some limited way the wonder and mystery of this loving God, we also find our way in the world—humble servants for God, our neighbor, and this wonderful creation. This is our path, this is our way. For the first 5 centuries or so, following Jesus was not so much about doctrine, esoteric beliefs, or a way to an other-worldly heaven, but it was a way of practicing a certain way of being in the world and following Christ’s example—living in the kingdom of God, as it were.

Justin Martyr, an early defender of the faith (ca 100-165) said:

We who formerly . . . valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to everyone in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemiesⁱ

And so we begin the “Way” of Holy Week. We begin to make new the power of the message of humility and sacrifice for one another. All this week the message is repeated amidst the political turmoil taking place, and ultimately, starkly, told in the crucifixion of Jesus. And the seduction of death and despair is all around us in the stories this week: in the cowardice and betrayal of the disciples, in the manipulative sanctimony of the religious, in

the lust for power and control of the governor, in the blind obedience of the soldiers, in the fickleness of the masses. But of course the story of crucifixion was turned on its head, and instead of being a tortuous means of death, became the way to a new kingdom and eternal life that begins now!

The good news, of course, is that if we remain conscious and awake, if we avoid the temptation of dualism—the tendency to think too much either/or rather than both/and—we live life more fully in the Way. We live life, as Jesus would say, in the Kingdom of God which is at hand—now, today! You see, it was this week, this Holy Week, that put a final exclamation to the point of Jesus’ life and ministry. It finally, really, wasn’t going to be about a political coup for the homeland, it really was about a different kind of liberation and a different kind of homeland, and a different kind of ‘way’.

Think this week of people all over the world who are celebrating this week in their own way, but with the same message of self-sacrificing love: in Scandinavia, in Cambodia, in Japan in the Nippon Sai Ko Kai (Anglican Church Japan), in the churches of India, in the ‘Three Self Movement’ of independent churches in China, in the ‘Base Christian Communities’ of Latin America, in the churches of the Native people of the arctic, in the Palestinian Christian churches, in the many churches of Africa, in the churches of Ukraine and Russia. All around the world people are hearing the story once again of the servant leader who sacrifices all for love, who sacrificed all for us.

Pray, dear sisters and brothers, that this message will be new to us and to our brothers and sisters around the world; and inspire us all to work for his reign in this world.

ⁱ 1] Justin Martyr, First Apology, chapter 14, as quoted in Rowan Greer, *Broken Lights and Mended Lives: Theology and Common Life in the Early Church* (Pennsylvania State University Press: 1986), 13., from: <https://cac.org/people-of-the-way-2019-01-21/> (April 13, 2019)