

Palm Sunday: Year C—April 10, 2022

All Saints', Littleton

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Liturgy of Palms—Mark 11: 1-11

Isaiah 50: 4-9A

Psalm 22

Philippians 2: 5-11

Luke 22: 14-62

And so it begins! 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’; and the ‘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. The laying down of palm branches and cloaks was also a sign of honor for a king or liberator.

But in the story Jesus had his own corrective twist. This gospel writer has the story about 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. But in doing so, I think Jesus was trying to scale back expectations. A liberator would normally be riding into a city on a grand horse and accompanied by troops. And of course, we

know the story how the adoring crowds grew fickle over the course of the week and by Friday they were demanding his death. The same people? Different people? There certainly was a tug of war between two political factions 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.

And 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 teaches them again about what it means to be a true leader—about humility and service. He contrasts the kings of this age with the new servant-leader ethic he is about. In contrasting this world leadership with his leadership he says, "But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves." In fact, all this week, over and over again, he is contrasting his 'kingdom' and way of being in the world with what they know and expect. The religious leaders and Pilate stumble over this too.

There is that enigmatic little section about how they should now equip themselves, and he seems to be encouraging them to sell their cloaks and buy swords. At this point, it feels to me that Jesus is looking into the future and seeing what will be, rather than what should be. When they showed him 2 swords, he said 'it is enough'. I can only imagine him sighing in exasperation.....for truly 2 swords, 2 pistols, 2 weapons are often enough to begin massive bloodshed; and so we witness in Ukraine today. It is the way of the dualistic mind, not the mind of Christ—the 'them against us' mentality. But later on, his true ethic shows through when he tells them to put away the swords and heals the high priest's servant's ear.

At the end of this gospel we hear the denial of Peter—three times. He at least was hanging close to where Jesus was when the others scattered, but he was afraid. Those in the courtyard seemed to think they saw him with Jesus, and then maybe his Galilean accent gave him away too....somehow they could tell he was Galilean. And when he had betrayed Jesus the third time the cock crowed and Jesus looked at him. Can you imagine that scene? Was Jesus still nearby or up in some cell or room where he could see Peter from a window or

doorway? Can you imagine their eyes locking when the rooster crowed, and the word of Jesus was fulfilled?

And I 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.

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. Do you remember, as the Book of Acts tells us, that the first Christians were not called Christians, they were called 'People of the 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, and 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 enemies . . . .<sup>i</sup>

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. In our Christian practice we have sacramentalized this death and rebirth, while we are yet living, in the waters of baptism. In fact, the going down into the waters of baptism symbolically represent this death. And for any of us who have any awareness at all, we recognize in life the many different kinds of death we experience as we live. The death of love, relationships, dreams and hopes, bodily health, and the list goes on. The pain of these deaths and transitions are partly what defines human existence.

In Christ these deaths become for us transitions to a greater awareness and wholeness, but only if we remain conscious. 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.

The good news, of course, is that if we remain conscious, 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. 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.

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<sup>i</sup> 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)