

2020 April 5, Palm Sunday

The church is called to reckon with paradox on this day: triumph and rejection, death and rebirth. This day is the entrance into the most holy time of year when all the most profound truths of human life are exposed.

Today gives us the image of cheering crowds, glad to have their “savior” entering into the city, and the image of the cruel machinations of the powerful who know their stranglehold on the rabble must be locked in by the exercise of strong and uncompromising contempt.

This story is not a documentary; it is also not a fiction. Instead, it is a proclamation of faith. From it, we receive the face of God in the midst of desolation. It is a face of resignation and deep comprehension. The failings of the people who create this abomination -- and that of all victimization in human history - is known intimately by God. Even more vividly, God knows the pain of victims. Those who suffer without rescuers, those who are tormented and never defended, those who are counted as nothing, those who are mocked and tortured -- all these are the ones whose lives Jesus takes on himself in this great story.

So the story calls for a testimony of what God is doing, because that is the other side of the coin. The humans are full of plotting, neglect, and finally killing what is good. Unless you look carefully, God, on the other hand, doesn't seem to be doing much. The humans are going about their business without divine power swooshing in to rescue or transform anyone -- sort of what people ask about life today. Where is God when things are not going well? Have we been abandoned? When we ponder this story, however, we find God's power deeply at work in Jesus. Look at how Jesus is depicted, how the power of the holy one is portrayed.

The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday shows the awe and expectation that the people had in the reputation of this miracle-worker Jesus, whom many now believed to be the long-awaited Messiah. The people were hyped to see a King, one who would vanquish the hated Romans.

What more likely time than at Passover, which commemorates the liberation of God's people from bondage in Egypt. Why not liberation from Rome as well?

Why do we also confront his death in the Passion drama today? Part of the answer is simply to reinforce the truth that Christ is triumphant **because** he is come to fulfill the will of his Father. His hour has come; he rises to glory by emptying himself at the Cross for all mankind. I like to think of him at that time as emptying himself of humanness to be ready to adopt us to live in Him by the Spirit he bestows on us when we claim him as our Savior.

The story of Holy Week takes us from the expected power of an earthly king to the eternal throne of a heavenly king. Only if Christ were to die, could He overcome death, the greatest enemy, the feared obliteration of self. He knowingly walked this path of sorrow and pain that we might live in him beyond the grave. This is why he rode in triumph into Jerusalem. He was indeed a King. A King that the people needed to see. They would come to know his power later, and in a very, very different way. A King who would never die, a King of glory, son of Love.

The drama of what takes place between Matthew 21, as our liturgy opened today, and Matthew 26-27 is meant by the Gospeler to elicit a deep resonance in the Jews to the continuity of the Christ story in their own tradition: the Messiah of the Old Testament, the teacher, the humble servant. To the people who hailed him as Messiah and King and were devastated when he meekly went to the Cross, this Gospel reminds them that it is still God's plan and they must trust Him.

Matthew 21 opens the story on the eve of the Feast of Tabernacles – families were camped in the hills outside Jerusalem in high spirits, anticipating their entry into Jerusalem the next day for the beginning of Passover. This was a very important time as one of three annual pilgrimages required of observant Jews from the time of Moses, when God commanded his people to appear before him three times a year. And now God lived in the Ark of the Covenant in the great Temple in Jerusalem. The Tents where people lived and entertained these five days of Passover were symbolic of the tents the Israelites had lived in during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Passover not only

remembered that past time but also held expectation of that future victory when all of Israel's enemies would be vanquished. This is the time to remember that it was the blood of the lamb God told his people to put on their doorposts that alerted the angel of death in time of plague to pass them by. The blood of the Lamb saved them from genocidal annihilation.

The people also remembered the prophecy of Zechariah that a vengeful warrior king would come into Jerusalem by the Mount of Olives and restore the reign of David in an independent Israel. The palm branches strewn in his path were an ancient sign of victory. *Jesus embraced this triumph as hailing the victory of the kingdom of God over all kingdoms of men.* This was the traditional day for choosing the sacrificial Lamb, and it was for this honor Jesus rode in triumph on that day, not to be the king of men, but as the lamb of God.

As the Lamb of God he rode to his sacrifice, as ordained by his Father. For this he was born as man.

His grand entrance fanned the flames of hatred by the priestly class. It was the final straw to see the people hailing Jesus as the long-awaited King and they began to plot his destruction in earnest. That week Jesus grew bolder in his criticism of their hypocrisy, he tossed out the money changers in the Temple; he confronted their laws.

But when he was finally charged before the high priests and would not defend himself, the people turned on him in profound disappointment. The masses were a fickle lot, as masses often are. They felt betrayed. They cried out for an ignominious death of a fallen king who would **not** be king of the world.

It is fitting that Holy Week begin in triumph so that we, too, may differentiate between a king of the world and a king of eternal glory. God's ways are mysterious, but it is a mystery we are invited into through Christ. This drama teaches us that the world is resistant to God's ways, and that, like Peter, like the crowd at the foot of the cross, we are called in tears and shame to repentance. To his disciples on the Mount of Olives, Jesus said "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial, but if such trial

comes to us all the same, remember Jesus' prayer, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." It is good to waive our palm branches and cry out our joy at his glorious arrival and honor. But Jesus summons us to do more. We are to go with him all the way to the Cross, fully prepared and willing to suffer by meeting this world on its own terms, a servant of God, in Jesus name, standing against evil and giving only Love as a reflection of the Divine.

A 4th century Church father said that God's time on earth as Jesus was to become like us, so that we may become like him - to live and die and live again.

Jesus' choice to live as a servant is not a *deferral* of his divine nature, but rather *its truest expression*. It is into this life of the Kingdom that we are invited by the blood of his sacrifice.

The Lamb of God bids us come.

May you be blessed this Holy Week with a deeper understanding of the courage and pain of Christ's sacrifice for us; it was not for glory, **which was already his**, but in obedience to his Father's will for the sake of the World he loves. It was all for Love. It was all for Love.