

Palm Sunday, Year C
St. Luke's Passion
March 28, 2010
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Over the centuries Palm Sunday has become something of a hybrid in the life of the Church. During this liturgy we move from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the crucifixion of Jesus a scant six days later. In order to dramatize that movement more completely we are this year borrowing an idea first employed, as I understand it, by the Rev. Elaine Breckenridge of St. David's here in Spokane, and then used to good effect by Margaret Fisher when she was the rector of Grace Church in Ellensburg. Instead of reading the story of the entry into Jerusalem during the liturgy of the Palms, we just read it as the Gospel lesson for the day. After communion, the last thing we will do is hear the Passion Gospel from Luke, then a beautiful trumpet piece from Larry Jess as a compliment to and interpretation of that Passion, and after that we will leave the Church in silence, because at that point, there will indeed be nothing more to say.

But just now, midway through this remarkable moment, there is something to say, or rather a question to ask. On Sunday he entered Jerusalem to shout "hosannas" and blessings as one who "comes in the name of the Lord." On Friday he was dead, executed, an affront both to the majesty of Imperial Rome and the faith of his own ancestors. The question the Church has been asking ever since is "How do we explain what just happened? How we are to

understand the movement from popular hero to crucified criminal in less than one week's time?"

Contrary to what many Christians believe, in the entire Catholic tradition of which we are a part no one, no group, no college or committee has ever declared a single definitive answer to that question. The most we have officially stated is contained in the Nicene Creed; this strange and dramatic turn of events happened "for us" and "for our sake." These two vague statements have provided a large field for theological reflection ever since, and given rise to many ways of understanding that movement from triumphal entry to execution. The most popular is nearly a thousand years old. Jesus died a substitute for us, an atoning sacrifice that opened the way for God to forgive the sins of all people forever, and this is what makes that death so important. Without that death God does not forgive, and we live in our sins forever. But with that death, with that substitutionary sacrifice, God is now free to forgive us. No one here has not heard this explanation of the meaning of the death of Christ; no one here has been unaffected by it. I have spent much of my life first believing it altogether, then considering it and wondering about it, and finally beginning to doubt it altogether.

For I do not see how Jesus could possibly have been coming to Jerusalem with the idea in mind of changing God, of freeing God from a burden of righteous anger which made God unable to forgive the sins of people. Indeed, if the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Woman and the Coin,

the Shepherd and the Lost Sheep, the Workers in the Vineyard, and his repeated references to the love of God being like rain and sun, falling on the just and unjust in equal measure and just alike – if any of those parables and statements actually do go back to the historical Jesus – then Jesus must have proclaimed that God’s love and forgiveness is eternal and unconditional; it is a love and forgiveness that in fact precedes any human admission of guilt, any offering or sacrifice for sin. If the Jesus we have in the gospels is to be made in any way consistent with the Jesus who died on the cross after being acclaimed as a king, then he couldn’t have been going to Jerusalem to fulfill some cosmic law that required blood sacrifice in order to secure forgiveness, since he seems to have believed and taught that such forgiveness is part of the very fabric of the universe. He could not, in other words, have been going to Jerusalem in order to change God. If there was any larger purpose to Jesus’ last week of life, then there must have been something else going on. And if he wasn’t trying to change God, then I can assume only that he was trying to change us. That, not terribly oddly, is what history records, that this death changed us.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem as described in the book of Zechariah “humble and riding on a donkey” he was declaring not simply that the Kingdom of Heaven was coming some day, but that it is here now; it has arrived among us. It is a kingdom that is governed and ruled precisely by this God who forgives everything, who embraces all, whose love includes all creation, and who therefore dehumanizes no one. It is a kingdom that establishes peace not

through conquest, but through justice administered with compassion. It is a kingdom sustained not by defeating enemies by violence, but by a forgiveness that simply has no enemies. I don't see any other way to make the stories Jesus told consistent with the way Jesus died except to believe that both his life and his death pointed at such a kingdom, which is why he not only could, but had to tell God to forgive those who killed him, "for they know not what they do."

It hardly need be said that such a kingdom is incompatible not just with Imperial Rome, but with every kingdom that has ever divided the world into "us" and "them" which is to say every other kingdom. It is incompatible with every person who finds it important to dehumanize people because of the fear induced by kingdoms intent upon sustaining the "us" over against the "them" of the world. And moreover, and certainly as important, such a kingdom is incompatible with a religious imagination that collaborates with the dehumanizing tendencies of humanity by declaring either that God loves some people and hates others, or loves everyone but accepts only a few, who of course and inevitably, just happen, perhaps by coincidence, to be us.

The immediate cause of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion was probably the incident in the Temple, where he shut down the whole blood sacrifice system during the most politically volatile holiday in the Jewish year. But I believe the larger reason was this; he died because it is just too hard to deal with a person who won't collaborate in a system that creates enemies, and that depends for its

existence upon violence and the threat of violence that is so much a part of the spiritual infrastructure of this world.

And that is exactly where the death of Jesus causes the change in us, and why we can say this death was “for us and our salvation.” He died to show us that it is not God who requires blood, but the kingdoms of this world and the spiritual institutions that collaborate with the kingdoms of this world who require it. He died to wake us up to the truth that it isn’t God who makes enemies and dehumanizes people, we are the ones who do that, and we sustain this through our institutions. He died most of all to make us keenly aware that sustaining this way of being always and inevitably leads us to killing God in the name of God. It is not, in other words, bad people trying to do the wrong thing that do this; Holy Week shows us as nothing else ever has that it is good people trying to do the right thing that do this.

It just seems to me that this has to change us; it has to transform us completely as people, though that process is marked by our own willfulness. If we know that when we dehumanize people, dividing the world into “us” and “them,” and make any effort to justify that spiritually we are not collaborating with the Kingdom Jesus brought in, but with the kingdom Roman Imperial Power brought in, then must we not in that very moment stop that very dehumanizing and embrace as fully human, those we had previously identified as “them”? If the death of Jesus really shows us that to make a virtue – even a spiritual virtue – out of identifying enemies and ridding ourselves of them

inevitably leads us into stubborn and even lethal opposition to those who “come in the name of the lord” then must we not in that moment realize that God is calling us to stop doing that?

Holy week, it seems to me, is God’s way of telling us that it is the kingdoms of this earth that are born and sustained through violence and blood sacrifice, not the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God, on the contrary, is born whenever and wherever people finally abandon violence, and embrace those previously identified as enemies in the bonds of compassion and fellowship. The cross of Christ is meant to wake us up to this truth, not so as to change God, whose love for us is ever unwavering, but so as to change us, to open us to the power of that kingdom.

For to be sure, that kingdom of heaven is here; it lives and grows among us. Though its power is ceaselessly opposed by those who would divide and scatter, yet that kingdom remains, abiding with us now and forever.

