

From Palms to Passion

Palm / Passion Sunday - April 9, 2006

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Who among us does not like something about parades? Whether grand like the annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade down Fifth Avenue or the Rose Bowl Parade on New Year's Day in Pasadena; or as down home as a college or high school homecoming parade – there is something thrilling about a parade. The crowd, the outfits and floats, the music and food, the excitement and expectation. *"I love a parade."*

Today, you and I join the Church of Jesus Christ around the world, and in every time and place, lending voice in word and song, with palms and movement, and children (they are the best parade makers and lovers!), in celebrating a unique parade: an absurd and fateful one, unlike any in the history of the world. On this Sunday of Palms, we reenact an ending and a beginning in the life of Jesus: for this parade marks the end of Christ's public ministry and the beginning of his deliberate march to meet betrayal by friends and to his death, even death on a cross. For all the anticipation and excitement this festival day arouses in us, and the joy it engenders, the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is ironic and comical, bitter-sweet and tragic. Among the shouts of hosanna, "Save us, now!" there rises the question, "Who is this?" Who is this One who comes bouncing into town on the back of a donkey? Who is this, indeed?

Masses of people were flooding into Jerusalem to commemorate Passover. The roads into the city filled as Jews from all corners of the known world flooded into the city to celebrate this most holy and sacred festival. Jerusalem may have swelled to 2.5 million people during the days of Passover - crowds pushing their way through the gates of the city towards the Temple – to fall with joy into its shadow - there to worship and to remember the One who brought them out of slavery in Egypt into the freedom. There to make sacrifice: perhaps in thanks for blessings received that year – the birth of a child, a successful year of business. Maybe to seek forgiveness for breaking a commandment, to ask for God's protection and help. There to call upon God to send the Messiah to "save them now." Here in the noise and confusion, along with this massive pilgrimage, comes Jesus with his disciples to participate in his people's festival of memory and redemption.

Jesus was no stranger to many in the crowd. Having made his reputation in the hinterlands beyond Jerusalem, he had already attracted quite a following. After all those years in the backwaters, he finally makes his way into the capital city. Recognized by many as a miracle worker, a healer, a great teacher who both comforted and disturbed, others were asking, "Who is this?" "Son of David," people shouted. "No, it's the prophet Jesus," others cried out.

"Who is this?" Indeed, who is this scruffy, backwoods, ne'er-do-well who comes bounding into town on a donkey's back? A prophet? Yes, he was. A prophet – a speaker of truth, naming injustice for what it was. Calling the rich and the powerful to account and responsibility from God's perspective. Jesus – a prophet, yes. If you were one of the common folk in the crowd, as most of us are – you'd be pushing up to the front of the crowd to see this man because he is saying things and in such a way that you have hope for the first time in a long, long time.

On the other hand, if you happened to be rich and powerful as most of us are in this sanctuary – you might view this prophet Jesus with less than great enthusiasm. For you see, the prophets of Israel were notoriously tough on the politicians, the lawyers and bankers. Prophets and the powerful have never liked one another. And yet, as great as prophets can be for some and as disturbing as they are for others, prophets are never enough. Speaking the truth is a great achievement. And prophets are always in short supply. But doing the truth, being the Truth – well, that’s another matter all together. You know that. So, how do we move from talk about what’s right to doing right?

Sometimes the church, her people and her preachers, exacerbate our already deep frustration. The church and her people can fill the air with “should” and “ought” and “must.” So much scolding at times and finger-pointing about all the things you don’t do or what you’re like. And yet, we don’t give people a way to do them. When will we – you and I – learn that human beings simply cannot do and be good simply by being told they ought to do and be good? How do words become translated into deeds? How does any idea and possibility take on real flesh and blood?

The apostle Paul, one of the best Christians who ever lived, complained about the gap between his knowledge of what he ought to do and his ability to actually do it. Is there any hope for us? Something more is needed than a prophet. More is needed and it can be found in our response to the question, “Who is this Man?” How often our faith bends like palm branches and falls like scattered cloaks at our feet when the world asks us, “Who is this? Who is this Man?” “Why, he is the one who helps us with our problems, who always comforts and never chides.” Who is this? “Oh, Jesus – that marvelous moral example of the best of human ideals – a great ethical teacher, a Jewish Mahatma Gandhi.” Who is this? “Well, according to the Jesus Seminar, he is a ‘God-intoxicated Galilean.’”

Who is this? The people attending the parade in Jerusalem thought they saw a prophet, a great spokesperson for God. By the end of the week’s events, many saw God. That’s why you’re here, even if you didn’t know that’s why you’re here. You’re here looking for God. You have come hoping to see God – not just see a prophet, a healer, a great teacher. You do not come to this day, to this festival for any more advice, any more challenging words, certainly no moralizing, not for cotton candy fluff of self-improvement. You seek God. That’s who you want to see and you stand on tiptoes, hoping to get a glimpse.

The parade is coming to an end, and perhaps you’re disappointed that it’s over so quickly. Maybe the parade wasn’t glitzy enough, not as entertaining as you had hoped. Maybe you didn’t see what you wanted or that you heard too much and your ears are buzzing. Maybe someone stepped on your toes while they shoved to the front of the line and you are still angry at them. Regardless where and how we find ourselves in this parade – in spite of our faith or little belief, our present praise or future betrayal, this parade is not about us, though it most certainly is for us. This extraordinary parade is about a most extraordinary God who comes right into town, right straight into our lives on the back of a donkey. The one to whom we cry, “Hosanna! Save us!” does just that – not by strength but in humility. Not on the steed of power, prestige and military might which the world wants. Rather this One saves us by quietly moving into the middle of us, among us – in strange and lowly disguise, into the center of faith and contradiction, of belief and disbelief. The good news of this parade boldly, outrageously claims that Jesus

was not only prophet and teacher who spoke the truth; the gospel claims he is Truth. He did not just talk about God. He was God. In him, in this sometimes comforting, often disturbing Jesus of Nazareth, the Church declares that the world has seen as much of God as we ever hope to see.

If we find ourselves among the stragglers at the end of the parade, if we look down the road and up a hill call Calvary, we'll see where good intentions and trying to do the right thing ends up. At the end of the week, when Jesus dies, on the cross, the whole world heaves, for what he is about is large, cosmic. When he dies, the veil in the Temple is ripped from top to bottom – the veil separating us mere mortals from the living God. It was ripped because, in Jesus, there is nothing now that separates from the love of God in Christ.

The question, “Who is this?” takes us from palms to passion. It is on this question that our lives, our hope depend. Who is this who we see moving into our city, towards us and our need, coming down Delaware Avenue then trotting over to Ferguson Avenue? Who is this man who comes into our crowded lives, into our good intentions?

The parade is over, the shouts of hosanna have ended. We can put down our palms. Empty, let's take each other's hands – let's go see where Truth ends up, where it leads us. Amen.