

Palm Sunday C - 28 March 2010
Isaiah 50 4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56
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It is an incredible mix of human experience. There is the experience of extreme joy, high celebration, blended with the experience of seething anger, of profound despair, inconsolable grief, and an inescapable sense of guilt and shame. Palm Sunday, also referred to as Passion Sunday, contains the breadth and depth of all of these.

The Palms are reminiscent of the celebratory entrance that Jesus makes upon entering the holy city of Jerusalem as the week-long festival of Passover begins. Palms are laid on the dusty road, along with some people's coats, as a means of helping keep down the dust and thereby honor this dignitary, in this case Jesus of Nazareth.

He is only an itinerant preacher. In later times, he would have been known as a circuit rider, or a traveling evangelist. Even they, though, would have more credibility attached to their profession than Jesus does to his. Jesus is without pedigree, without official sanction from the accredited teachers and rabbis in his day. He has been wandering from town to town, mostly in the far reaches of Hebrew Palestine that are the furthest from Jerusalem, the seat of orthodoxy in his day.

He has been audaciously claiming his own authority to teach, to touch, to heal, to be companion to the least acceptable, to the most outcast, and to the anonymous peasantry everywhere. He has been telling people that God loves them, that God forgives them, that God's Kingdom is among them, among *them* of all people. It is little wonder that now, as he dares openly to approach this city at one of these times and seasons when its religious and spiritual status is most acutely important, that the ignorant masses respond to him as though he is coming here to fix everything, to throw out the professional

hypocrites, maybe overthrow even the occupying force Romans, and bring in a new and victorious day for the people of God.

If this is how the antagonists of Jesus are seeing it, it remains true that the people who lay down the palms and lift up their voices are nevertheless truly blessed with the arrival of Jesus. Their experience of him, accurate or not, is happy and joyful and encouraging and inspiring and celebratory. And few people could argue that it should be otherwise. He is the Savior, after all. If he is savior in a way not quite in accord with the people's assumptions about him, he is, nonetheless, the savior. The role of palms in this day help us to recall the experience of the celebration that is due.

The day is also known as Passion Sunday. As we have just experienced, the day recalls for Christians, like you and me here today, the other elements of the emotional and spiritual mixture that quickly deny the possibility that our recollection will end on the high note with which it began.

We are forced by the gospel to recognize that even the highest moment in our regular Sunday service, the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, is born in Jesus' keen awareness that he will not do this again unless and until his suffering has been accomplished. We are reminded that even this most sacred and intimate event is soiled by the presence of the one who is about to betray him. The Passion, i.e. the suffering that Jesus endures in these hours, continues the disturbing, even repugnant, mix of beatitude and blessing, with the most base and disgusting examples of hatred, fear, and despair.

I will suggest, though, in fact, I'm persuaded that God suggests it with the very events that we recall this day and this week, that it is this disturbing

unpredictable blend of the best and worst of all that it is to be human that contains a quiet blessing that God intends us to find. It is found in the mix of Peter's declared determination to stay with Jesus no matter what, with his display of fear and cowardice just a little while later. It is found in a disciples' militant defense of Jesus in maiming one of Jesus' enemies mixed Jesus' own kindness toward the injured man in healing him, then surrendering to him.

It is found in the ironic mix of his accusers daring Jesus to claim that he is indeed the Messiah, with his own observation that by their very actions and behavior toward him, they themselves are deciding that he is exactly that. It is found in the blend of Jesus' increasingly silent resignation before his persecutors combined with their increasingly infectious hostility toward someone not even yet condemned. It is found in Pilate's all-too apparent desire to spare Jesus with his all-too ready willingness to sentence him officially to a most excruciating death.

And it is found in the blend of Jesus' own suffering under the burden of his innocence and the material burden of the weight of the cross with his spiritual burden of sympathy for those who weep for him along the way, or who begs him to set aside his own suffering and forgive just one more person, one more guilty and repentant person, before it is too late for either of them.

It is found in the irony of the crowds on the one hand crying for Jesus' death, but on the other returning to their homes afterward lamenting the spectacle that they've come out to witness. It is this blend of what we want to have in our lives and of what we want to be with what we wish to deny about our lives, ourselves, and what we wish to avoid in them that holds the blessing that we cannot have in any other way.

It is a blending of the fullness of human experience, this Palm and Passion Sunday. If our lives were constant celebration, always filled with reason to be joyful, always fulfilled with what we need or what we think we need, there would be no cause for celebration when Jesus enters into them.

If we bore no guilt like the thief on the cross, if we knew no grief like the women along Christ's path through the crowd; if we only the capacity for goodness, for selflessness, for truth; if our lives held no resemblance with the hypocrisy of the chief priests, elders, scribes, with the brutality of the guards around Herod or Pilate, with the violence of the crowds demanding blood in revenge for their disappointment, then we could never know the magnitude of God's Love for us and for all.

We would never know the blessing, the quiet blessing, of being able to share in the sadness that others feel because we have felt our own; or in the anger that others have because of the anger that we have known; we would not be able to pray for them with the sympathy and the authenticity that we can bring as someone who knows very much as they do what it is to be disappointed, hurt, frustrated, regretful, repentant.

Nor would we be able to rejoice with someone who has arrived at new joy on the other side of grief; at new hope on the other side of despair. Nor we would know the blessing of having others pray also for us who have been where we are, perhaps who are there right now, but who pray not for themselves, but who pray for us instead, anyway.

This day, this week, this lifetime, my hope for you and for me, and I think it is God's hope for us all, is that we will embrace this blending of all it is to be, of all it is to pray, with the fullness of who we are as people of God, a people of palms and passion. Amen.