

***The Power of Living for Others:
Blessed is the King Who Brings Life by Dying***

A Sermon for Palm Sunday

March 24, 2024

Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park

The Rev. Chase Danford, Rector

“Palm Sunday”

*Now to the gate of my Jerusalem,
The seething holy city of my heart,
The saviour comes. But will I welcome him?
Oh crowds of easy feelings make a start;
They raise their hands, get caught up in the singing,
And think the battle won. Too soon they'll find
The challenge, the reversal he is bringing
Changes their tune. I know what lies behind
The surface flourish that so quickly fades;
Self-interest, and fearful guardedness,
The hardness of the heart, its barricades,
And at the core, the dreadful emptiness
Of a corrupted¹ temple. Jesus come
Break my resistance and make me your home.*

-Malcolm Guite

Palm Sunday is a day of spiritual whiplash. Joyful cheering gives way to the cries of an angry mob. In place of "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" we will soon hear "'Crucify him!" From a triumphal entry into Jerusalem to a trial and execution. What exactly happened in that fateful week that changed everything?

From the various gospel accounts, we read that Jesus drives out the profiteers from the Temple, that he denounces the scribes and priests, that he heals the sick on the Sabbath, and allows people to believe that he is the Messiah. Any

¹ The poet's original word is perverted, but I substituted corrupted because I felt that "perverted" could be too easily misconstrued in an anti-semitic manner.

one of these things would have incited the religious authorities, but taken together, they make a compelling case against Jesus--that he is in flagrant violation of the religious law of the time, and perhaps even more dangerous, that he is a disturber of the uneasy peace that the religious authorities have attempted to make with the agents of the Roman occupation. This is not just a benevolent moral teacher we are dealing with. This is a revolutionary, but one who does not take up arms. Instead, he bears a garland of peace and a crown of thorns. A prophet of peaceful liberation was ultimately more threatening to the forces of domination than violent insurrection.

Jesus knew the road he was walking would lead to this. What gave him the strength, the courage to keep going?

Let's take a look at the epistle reading, St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. In it, we hear a piece of scripture that is often referred to as the Christ hymn, or Kenosis hymn:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This is a very old Christian affirmation about Jesus, and scholars believe it predates Paul's letter. So, from the earliest days of the Christian movement, believers have been exhorted to have the same mind as Christ, and the mind of Christ is characterized in this writing as being concerned with self-offering and self-giving. And, according to this hymn, Christ is in the form of God, which is another way of saying that Christ is the image of God and that Christ discloses the nature of God to us. Since, then, Christ is in the form of God, God is about self-offering. The very nature of God, as this hymn affirms, is in the giving of God's self for the life of all. This is first manifested in creation, when from the divine essence, God creates the universe. God gives of God's self so that life might exist. And then in the Incarnation, God gives of God's

self, manifesting in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, so that the world might better understand and embody the self-giving nature of divine love.

When the Philippians Christ hymn says that Christ was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, we can affirm that Christ was being obedient to his mission of giving birth to a reign of peace, justice, and love into the world. The political and religious system that he criticized was oppressing people's physical and spiritual lives, and Christ came to liberate us from all bondage. Unlike some Christians, I absolutely do not believe that Jesus, the Son of God, died to appease an impersonal and inexorable system of cosmic justice that a vengeful Father put in place. Rather, Christ is the manifestation of divine self-offering that first gave of itself to create the universe and then, in order to bring more light and life into the world, incarnated in a human person to preach peace, justice, and love to all.

Did Jesus have to die in order to bring about the salvation of the world? That is a deep theological question that has been probed for centuries and that I would not dare to answer with a simple yes or no. But, we do know from history that those who come to us with countercultural messages that challenge those in power do not often live long. The prophets of peace, justice and love who speak truth to power often find themselves persecuted and executed or assassinated. They did not seek to be killed, but they knew the possible cost. Jesus did not want to die, as we see in his dialogue with God in the Garden of Gethsemane, but he knew that being true to his mission might very well end with his death. But the mission did not end with his execution. In a week, we will proclaim the good news of the resurrection. How shall we celebrate this good news?

At its best, the Church follows in the footsteps of Christ, having the same mind that was in him as it follows in the way of the cross, the way of self-offering. As we follow that path and offer our lives to others, we bring new life into the world. The Crucifixion gives way to the Resurrection, and angry cries of "Crucify him!" give way once more to joyful shouts of "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

New life emerges from death. That is the story of this Holy Week that takes us from the procession of Palms to the Cross to the Empty Tomb.

This Holy Week, I invite us all to reflect on how we will prepare for the good news of the resurrection. How will new life emerge from death in your life? In the life of our community? In our world? Jesus died so that we might live. How will we have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus and live a life of love, a life that will give life to others, and also bring true life to ourselves.

In the words of the poet once more:

*Now to the gate of my Jerusalem,
The seething holy city of my heart,
The saviour comes. But will I welcome him?
...Jesus come
Break my resistance and make me your home.*

Amen.