

Sunday, March 25, 2018
Palm/Passion Sunday (Year B)

Mark 11.1-11; Philippians 2.5-11; Mark 14.1—15.47

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

On this day that begins as Palm Sunday and then abruptly takes a turn, becoming Passion Sunday, how often do we sit back and merely observe the events that unfold before us, taking the part of dispassionate observers? Maybe dispassionate is not quite the right term to use. After all, as faithful Christians, we cannot help but be moved by what we witness on this day. By the exultation of witnessing Jesus making his triumphal entry into Jerusalem with shouts of “Hosanna!” which we willingly and joyfully participate in. And before the high of that experience can wear off, we are brought to the depths of sorrow and despair as we witness Jesus’ Passion. Again, an event we enter into and engage in a unique way, albeit reluctantly. As we seek to enter into the most tragic, yet the most important, period in the life of our Lord. The most important period in our lives of faith.

On the surface, the events we commemorate this day read like a political thriller, a story of palace intrigue. We start off with One who is recognized and proclaimed as king by his people. Yet, even in the manner in which this happens, there are clues that this is different sort of king. There are clues that this story will be anything but typical. Even though he is exalted by the people, this king is different. He demonstrates great humility in taking on the office he has been called to – called to by God and by his followers. For he comes riding into town not on a powerful steed, but on a lowly colt. In so doing, he demonstrates his great humility. In so doing, he demonstrates what sort of king he will be. A man of the people. A king who can truly empathize with who they are. Another telling attribute of this king.

After the acclamation, the story starts to unfold as would be expected for the elevation of a king. There is the anointing with costly oil, symbolizing his office as king. Symbolizing God’s approval that he is duly chosen for the office and role he is about to take on. But even in the anointing, Jesus anticipates what is to come, referencing his death. Only no one anticipates that it will come so soon. Then there is a celebratory feast with all his loyal followers. And that’s when things begin to fall apart. That’s when the powers that conspire against this rightful king put their plot into motion. A plot to unseat this duly chosen and anointed king. As would be expected in such matters, there is betrayal. And lots of it. Jesus foretells Judas’ betrayal. And to the dismay of all present, he foretells “You will all become deserters.” That he will even be abandoned by his closest followers. In a further act of betrayal (of sorts), Peter, James, and John – the inner circle – are unable to even stay awake and support Jesus in his hour of anguish. Then there is the actual betrayal of Judas, who brings temple guards to arrest Jesus, pulling off the anticipated coup.

In what seems like a desperate act of defiance, Jesus proclaims that no matter what they do, he will still be crowned king and enthroned. “You will see the Son of Man seated on the right hand of Power.” And then the final act of betrayal. Peter, Jesus’ chief lieutenant, denies even knowing him not once, but three times. Jesus is put on trial on trumped up charges and found guilty. The crowds go wild. Cries of “Hosanna!” turn to shouts of “Crucify him!” And then, on

the way to his death sentence, he is mocked. "They clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him" and mockingly salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And then this king is placed on the most unlikely of thrones. He is nailed to a cross. An act of incredible barbarity. An act of utmost humiliation. A death that is reserved for the lowest of the low. A statement that this man is worth absolutely nothing. And there, this king dies, before he can even begin to reign. The conspirators have seemingly won. But even in death, there is still something about this king. The centurion standing guard recognized something in the way Jesus died. Something that spoke volumes about who Jesus was. To which the centurion said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

That is the story we watch unfold on this day. As we might watch a movie. But what we can easily forget is that this is not a story we merely watch. This is a story we are intimately a part of. For this king came among us to live as one of us. To experience life as we do. And to die as we do. That means that the story of his Passion is, on a more personal and intimate level, our story. For Jesus is just one player in this story. There are many others involved. We are involved.

Of the Passion narrative, 20th century English mystic Evelyn Underhill writes "The lash, the crown of thorns, the mockery, the stripping, the nails – life has equivalents." We are meant to be drawn into it. Even to identify with the characters. Who do you identify with? Those who shout "Hosanna" one minute and "Crucify him!" the next? The one who anoints him? The disciple who betrays him? The followers who abandon him? The disciples who cannot even provide support? The lieutenant who denies knowing him? Those who mock and deride him? Those who seek to demean his worth? Have we not, at times, participated in such actions or their equivalent. Have we not, at times, ourselves been on the receiving end of such actions or their equivalent? We feel this personally. Sometimes very deeply. And now, sadly, we see this played out in our society, expressed in the public square and on the national stage. You can't help but see it, feel it, as you listen to the impassioned speeches at yesterday's "March for Our Lives" events around the country and around the world. The Passion is Christ's. And the Passion is ours – personally, communally, societally.

This is not meant as an indictment against any of us, no matter who we may identify with. As one commentator notes, "Each of us is called to enter the Passion of Christ in the context of our own lives; each of us has our own Passion to endure and our own purgation." That is the power of what happens in the Passion. No matter who we are, no matter who we identify with, no matter what we have done, no matter what we have experience at the hands of others, there is deliverance. There is purification and cleansing. There is redemption.

Even in the midst of the brokenness, through Christ's own Passion, we are given the gift of grace that allows us to identify with the lone voice who declared "Truly this man was God's Son!" That allows us to draw strength from him. Or when, as Paul implores us in what amounts to his epilogue to the Passion Narrative, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Urging us to follow the example of Christ himself, who humbly and obediently traveled the path before him. Knowing this path does not define us, but rather, by God's grace and if we allow it, strengthens us and shapes us to become who God has called us to be.

This chapter of Jesus' life and ministry may end with his broken, dead body placed in a tomb. But that is not the end of the story. Not for him, and not for us. For such a tragic story deserves a better ending than a stone being rolled over the door of a dark tomb. For those of us who participate in the Passion – Christ's, our own, and our society's – deserve a glorious ending. And we will not be disappointed!