

Sunday, April 14, 2019
Palm/Passion Sunday (Year B)
Luke 19.28-40; Luke 22.14—23.56
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

In the span of a mere 45 minutes (give or take), we have gone from the Liturgy of the Palms to the Liturgy of the Passion. We have gone from Bethphage, through the gates of Jerusalem, to the Upper Room, to the Garden of Gethsemane, to the house of Caiaphas the high priest, to Pilate's Praetorium, to Herod's palace, back to Pontius Pilate, then on through the streets of Jerusalem to Golgotha. We have gone from celebrating Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem to witnessing his arrest, his trial, his execution, and his burial. We have gone from shouts of "Hosanna!" to shouts of "Crucify him!"

What are we to make of this head-spinning chain of events? At one time in the history of the Church, this day, Palm Sunday, was solely focused on Jesus' triumphal entry. The rest—Jesus' Passion—was left to the liturgies for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But in more modern times, it has all been conflated into one day, one service, that takes the shape of the one we are experiencing today. And for good reason. Sort of. At some point it became obvious that many Christians were not participating in the full array of Holy Week services. As a result, there was an increasing disconnect between what happens on Palm Sunday and what happens on Easter. To go from celebrating Jesus' triumphal entry one Sunday to celebrating his resurrection the next, with nothing in between—at least for the majority of worshipers—was to leave out a huge part of the story. It was like missing out on some key plot points in a movie. Miss those points, and the ending does not really make a lot of sense.

So the Church, in its attempts to accommodate the changing realities of society, chose to combine Palm Sunday with the Passion Narrative, creating Palm/Passion Sunday, in an attempt to provide a clearer picture of what this most holy of weeks is all about. All well and good on the surface. But the result is the disconnect we feel, that we experience, within this one day at the beginning of Holy Week. But in so doing, we had to cut out some of the details. We miss out on some of the finer points of the drama. We might have covered the highlights, but sacrificed the depth and intended meaning behind what truly happens during Holy Week. Of what happens on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

The reality is that Holy Week and Easter are actually one prolonged liturgy—one extended drama—spanning three days. The drama of Jesus' tender last moments with his disciples, where he celebrates the Last Supper, where he gives them a new commandment to love and care for one another; giving way to the drama of Jesus' Passion—his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. And all of this leading to the grand finale of his Resurrection on Easter. To fully understand what is happening, to fully experience what the events of Holy Week and Easter mean for our lives of faith, requires that we fully enter into the drama. That we experience, as if first-hand, the events as they happened, when they happened. With time in between to reflect, to catch our breath, to prepare for what comes next.

The story of Jesus' final days is not so much like a movie, but is more akin to a made-for-TV mini-series shown over successive nights. That being the case, what we have witnessed here today is more akin to a trailer, a preview of coming attraction, designed to whet our appetites, to give us a glimpse of what is to come in the succeeding nights of our Holy Week liturgies. Each different, each unique, each containing key parts of the puzzle, that must be experienced in total, lest we miss crucial details. Lest we miss out on the true meaning of the unfolding drama that reveals the deepest truths of who we are as Christians. For it is only by entering into the fullness of this Holy Week experience that, one week from today, we may similarly enter into the fullness of the joy of the Easter experience.

May this Holy Week be for you a rich and blessed sharing in some of the most important events of human history, as you experience first-hand what this journey is all about, as you gain a deeper understanding of your part in the drama, and as you experience the joy of where it will ultimately lead you. I assure you it will be time well-spent, and that you will not be disappointed.