

Sunday, March 28, 2021

Palm Sunday (Year B)

Philippians 2.5-11; Mark 14.1—15.47

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/158445049472093>

(Sermon begins at about 36:30)

“Mind of Christ”

Here we are. Palm Sunday. Also sometimes referred to as Passion Sunday. A day that is a bit schizophrenic. Or, at least, that is what it has become over time. The definition of schizophrenic is “of or relating to conflicting or inconsistent elements; characterized by unusual disparity.”¹ On this day, we certainly see conflicting elements and experience great disparity, as we go from celebrating Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem with shouts of “Hosannah!” to witnessing Jesus’ Passion, with shouts of “Crucify him!” And if “schizophrenic” doesn’t describe what we witness on this day, I don’t know what does.

In more ancient times, the commemoration of Palm Sunday focused on Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The rest—the commemoration of Christ’s Passion, was allowed to unfold on its own, throughout Holy Week. On Maundy Thursday with the Last Supper and on Good Friday with Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Allowing the drama to play out over the entire week. Somewhere along the line, we conflated all the events of Holy Week into this one day. And for good reason. As our lives became busier, it became more difficult for many people to take time out to attend all the Holy Week liturgies. The Church realized that this was happening, with the result that many people who are only able to get to church on Sundays were hearing about Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and then hearing about his Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Which left a disconnect. How did we get from triumphal entry to Resurrection? The part in between, the important part that rounds out the story, was left untold. At least for many people. So, the Church, in its wisdom—question mark?—came up with the idea of telling the whole story on Palm Sunday, so that those who could not attend church on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday would know how we got to Easter. Makes sense on a practical level. But it sets up a situation where some of us hear the Passion twice—on Palm Sunday, and then throughout Holy Week. And, as I said, sets up a bit of a schizophrenic experience on Palm Sunday. There’s just no way to win this one, I’m afraid. At least, not in a way that truly does justice to the Passion Narrative.

With this schizophrenic disconnect that we call Palm Sunday, I cannot help but wonder what was going through Jesus’ mind as he experienced all these events in real time. The Apostle Paul begins the Epistle reading we use for this day with the words, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . .” (Phil 2.5). Maybe that is how we are supposed to approach this day. How we are to enter into the experience of Holy Week more fully. By trying to get into Jesus’ head. By trying to view the events of this week—the events that we have just summarized in our Liturgy of the Palms quickly followed by the reading of the Passion of Our Lord—from Jesus’ perspective.

That was one of the things that ran through my mind when I visited Jerusalem in 2019. As I walked down the Mount of Olives from Bethphage to Jerusalem. As I looked down the hill to what is known as the Beautiful Gate. The gate that leads into the Temple area. The gate through which Jesus likely entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday.

As Jesus went down that hill, what went through his mind, knowing that with each step he was moving ever closer to his destination? That he was moving ever closer to the end of his earthly life. What went through his mind as he moved past the Garden of Gethsemane, located just across the Kidron Valley from the Beautiful Gate, knowing that this would be where he would be arrested? What went through his mind as he rode through the Beautiful Gate, greeted as a king; knowing that in a few days' time, following his arrest, that he would be taken back through those same gates—now not so beautiful—not as a king, but as a criminal being taken to trial?

Knowing what was to come, even if he didn't know all the details, it must have been a bittersweet moment for Jesus. A time filled with conflicting thoughts and emotions. Being greeted as a king, knowing that the crowd would soon turn on him. What humility it would have taken. What obedience, to go through with it. Which is precisely the purpose of Paul's words: "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" (Phil 2.5-8). A passage written to the Philippians, presenting "the story of Christ's incarnation as the ultimate paradigm for the humility and obedience" that Paul urges the Philippians to follow.² The humility and obedience that is required of all of us who follow Christ.

We can never fully understand or appreciate the extent of what Jesus went through that last few days of his life. That he went through for our sake. We can never understand what he was thinking or feeling as he went from his triumphal entry to his Passion. And while we experience a liturgical disconnect on this day, going from Palm Sunday to Passion Sunday—while we experience the schizophrenic quality of these extraordinary events—maybe that is the point. Maybe that is ultimately why we put ourselves through this liturgical whiplash. Because if we experience even a small amount of dis-ease, a small amount of discomfort, as we hear about these events, we can begin to glimpse what Jesus went through as he actually lived these events. And maybe we can begin to appreciate the humility and obedience with which he acted. Humility and obedience that reveal that he did all of this for us.

So, while this may all feel a bit schizophrenic to us—going from triumphal entry to crucifixion—for Jesus, this all made perfect sense. No disconnect. No conflicting elements. Just an act of pure love.

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/schizophrenic>

² *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2102.