

“What Christians Have Done to the Christ”

a sermon by

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Text: “They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head.” (Matthew 27:28).

This past Tuesday Charlotte welcomed to our city Elie Wiesel, holocaust survivor, author, and Nobel Peace Laureate. On Tuesday afternoon I participated in a discussion seminar with Professor Wiesel that included a number of religious leaders representing Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In his remarks to this group Elie Wiesel reflected on some of the events of his life. He shared with us some of the terrible experiences that he had suffered first at Auschwitz and then later at Buchenwald. He noted the fact that for him the most beautiful sight in the world was the sight of the uniforms of the American soldiers who liberated the concentration camp at Buchenwald where this sixteen-year-old boy was held captive. He reminisced as well about those years in Paris where he settled after the war. For ten years he could not speak about the atrocities he had suffered. When he was finally able to let the words flow out of him, he wrote his first book *La Nuit (Night)*, surely one of the most powerful books ever written. For months and months he searched for a publisher, but to no avail. No one wanted to publish the book. They simply did not believe that what he had written was true. He finally found a publisher for his book, a small Parisian publishing house that agreed to publish his novel under the condition that all future royalties would come not to the author but to the publisher. Today the book has sold 8.5 million copies (six million before Oprah).

The point that Elie Wiesel made over and over again was that one person can make a difference.

He spoke of his faith through all of this--he called it a "wounded faith." He had every reason to give up believing in God, but he refused to do so. Through the years he was afraid that no one would listen to the story of a small boy taken to a concentration camp where he watched his mother, father, and sister die. He wondered if it were possible for him to make a difference.

Several years ago Elie Wiesel was invited to speak to the German Parliament in Berlin. The site of the Parliament building is the very same place where Hitler's Reichstag once stood. When he appeared before the German government, he thanked them for all that modern Germany had become. He noted that Germany today is now a prosperous and democratic nation that time and time again has sought to redress the injustices toward the Jews. He told the Parliament that if there was one thing for which he could ask, it would be for someone to say to the Jews that they were sorry for what happened to the Jews during World War II. The very next week the President of Germany flew to Jerusalem, met with the Israeli Parliament, and issued to the Jews an apology on behalf of the German government for what had been done to the Jews in Hitler's Germany.

One person can make a difference.

I.

This morning, on this Palm Sunday, we begin a journey that reminds us that one person can make a huge difference. The road of Holy Week begins on a Palm Sunday that brought "Hosannas" and "Alleluias" to Jesus and his disciples as he entered the city of Jerusalem. It is a road that beckons us to follow throughout the tumultuous events of that first Holy Week: the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus' teaching in the Temple, the cursing of a fig tree. Then, finally the road leads to Gethsemane, Good Friday, and finally Easter Sunday.

The passage we read this morning marks one of the lowest points in all of Holy Week. Matthew's gospel tells us that after Pontius Pilate had condemned Jesus to death, the Roman soldiers began to torment and tease him. They stripped him and put a scarlet cloak or shoulder garment on him. Scarlet was the color of royalty. They took some thorns or small twigs and fashioned a makeshift crown that they placed on his head. They put a reed in his hand, as if it were a kind of scepter. Then they teased him and mocked him and cried out, "Hail, King of the Jews."

There is something terribly grotesque about this image of the scarlet coat. It was a color that Roman generals often wore and there was a cruel incongruity between the militaristic image that the scarlet cloak evoked and one who was the Prince of Peace. Imagine Elie Wiesel in a S.S. uniform, or Nelson Mandela dressed in a British morning coat selling Krugerands in Cape Town, or Mother Theresa in an Armani gown, and you begin to understand the terrible agony of that scene in the courtyard. They took the Prince of Peace and tried to turn him into a Roman general.

Sometimes I shutter when I think of what Christians have done to the Christ.

II.

For one thing we have made Jesus into a kind of God he would have never chosen to be. We have dressed him up in scarlet robes of metaphysical notions of divinity. We have pushed him off, as in the Byzantine frescoes, into a distant heaven, until the real Christ--the one who grew up in Nazareth, who taught beside the lake, who challenged the bigotry of the priests, who refused to bend before the power of Rome, prayed in agony at Gethsemane, and died courageously at Calvary--has been lost.

One of the most powerful scenes I know in literature is in Dostoevsky's great novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the novel Jesus returns to the city of Seville in Spain. He moves through the city, befriending the poor, healing the sick, and giving bread to the hungry. His appearance causes such an outcry that the Grand Inquisitor, who represents the church, goes to the jail cell where Jesus has been imprisoned. He tries to convince Jesus that he is not needed today. He will only be a hindrance to the work of the church. Finally, he expels Jesus into the night saying, "Go, and come no more...Come not at all, never, never!" And so Jesus goes away.

On this point the New Testament is clear. "God is love; and he that abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." That is to say that where love is, God is; where goodness is, God is.

Even so, Jesus himself was so human and so humble that one wonders what he would have thought had he been told of what people would say of him. "Why do you call me good?" he said on one occasion. "No one is good except God." He said that to a man whom he thought was over praising him. "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord,'" he said, "will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my father in heaven." He said that to those who thought that worship was a substitute for ethics.

III.

Then, too, we have made Christ a sponsor for social causes he would have never considered. For almost four decades the churches in this country have been divided between those who believe that the mission of the church is simply to offer comfort to those who are afflicted and those who believe that the mission of the church is to change society. Now, surely, only the very comfortable could believe that the mission of the church exists only to care for its own members. On the other hand, one does not have to live very long to realize that there are some things in life that are not going to be changed.

As one reads the New Testament, it is certainly clear that Jesus cared not only about the spiritual life of people; he cared deeply about their physical lives. The test of true religion for Jesus had to do with feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, and helping those on the very margins of our society. If Jesus were in our midst today, it is hard to imagine that he would not be concerned about the slums in our cities, the homeless on our streets, and the outcasts of our society.

In his comments to our group on Tuesday, Elie Wiesel noted that he had often wondered how National Socialism and the Third Reich could have blossomed in Germany. After all, Germany was by and large a Christian nation. It was home to Goethe and Schiller, to Bach and Beethoven, to Martin Luther and a host of great theologians and philosophers. The doctors who performed those vile experiments in Auschwitz were trained at some of the greatest universities in the world.

When I think of what we have done to the Christ, how we have placed that scarlet robe upon him, I am reminded of the words to the spiritual, “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?”

“Sometimes it causes me to tremble,
tremble, tremble...”

IV.

As we come to this Holy Week, surely we are reminded that we are being called to making a difference. That is what Jesus did. The gospels remind us over and over again that he “set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

In his novel *The Town Beyond the Wall*, Elie Wiesel relates an incident when a young man, Michael, who has survived the holocaust, returns to his hometown in Romania. There is something that is drawing him there, though he cannot name it. He returns to the center of the city where as a boy he, along with other Jews, were rounded up and placed in the cattle cars that would take them to the death camps. As he looks to the buildings around the train station, his eyes are drawn to a window that he remembered as a boy on that fateful day. There was a nameless face in the window--a spectator, the face of a man who watched as the Jews were rounded up and did nothing.

Surely God is calling each of us to be more than a spectator. As a congregation, there are so many ways that we can make a difference: in our families, our city, and our nation. There is nothing more important for us than to find the real Christ. Take that scarlet robe from him. Even the soldiers who mocked finally put his own cloak back on him. If only those of us who are his friends would do the same, we too might see the quality of his spirit, his way of life, and his vision of truth.

That is what Holy Week calls us to do. For if we do this, and only if we do this, then we will be ready to hear the words, “Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed.”