

“The Paradox of Palm Sunday”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

March 16, 2008

Text: “Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent the stones would shout out.’” (Luke 19:39-40).

This past weekend I had the chance to visit New York City with my daughter Lucy, who is now living in Washington, D.C. and teaching English at St. Stephen’s/Saint Agnes in Alexandria, Virginia. One of the courses she teaches this semester is a course entitled “The Loss of Faith,” in which the students are asked to read and reflect on a number of works that deal with the search for meaning in life. Currently, the students are read Shakespeare’s great tragedy, *King Lear*. One of the things Lucy is trying to communicate to the students is the great power of language that Shakespeare commands. She told of a theater company in Washington that was putting on a production of *King Lear*. The director was particularly interested in the sound effects, specifically the great storm that engulfs Lear at the end of his life. At one point the director visited a very famous actor who had played Lear on a number of occasions. He told the actor of his desire to create an atmosphere of the storm by using special effects of lightning, thunder, wind, and the pounding of rain. “Oh,” said the actor, “that won’t be necessary.” “But why,” replied the director, “the sounds are necessary to establish the mood of the storm.” “No,” said the actor. All of the necessary sounds are present in the words that Shakespeare uses. “If you listen carefully,” said the actor, “you can hear the storm. It lies within Lear himself.”

Words matter.

I.

This morning we have read words that are familiar to all of us. The account of the triumphal entry of Jesus in Jerusalem is told in all four of the Gospels. The story of Palm Sunday is an integral part of a larger story, the story of Holy Week that begins with a triumphal entry, then moves to the Cleansing of the Temple, the teaching of Jesus in the Temple, and then

finally the events of betrayal, denial, abandonment, the cowardice of Pontius Pilate and the anger of an unruly mob, crucifixion, and resurrection.

To be sure, the chronology of Holy Week has always raised some troubling issues for interpreters of the New Testament. According to the Gospel writers, the events of Holy Week are encompassed in an eight day period, beginning with Palm Sunday and ending on Easter. Many scholars have questioned whether these events could have all happened in so short a period of time. Some have even suggested that these events may have taken a matter of months, not days.

Moreover, there is a very different picture in the Gospel of John from the one painted in the other gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke frame Palm Sunday as the first and only visit of Jesus to Jerusalem. The Gospel of John relates three different occasions that Jesus entered into the city.

Although all the Gospel accounts follow the basic pattern that is established by Mark's gospel, there are nuances of difference as well. In Luke's account of that first Palm Sunday, there is no crowd present—only the disciples. Luke omits the palm branches as well and the shouts of Hosanna.

Luke has a special interest in Jerusalem. Whereas in Matthew and Mark the resurrected Christ meets his disciples in Galilee, this is not true in Luke. In Luke, the disciples remain in Jerusalem after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jerusalem is the place of Jesus' ascension and the place where the disciples receive the Holy Spirit.

So there are differences within Luke's account of that first Palm Sunday. And yet there is a common thread that runs through all of the Gospel writers' account of that Passion Sunday. Part of that thread is that Palm Sunday confronts us with a remarkable series of paradoxes.

II.

One of the paradoxes of Palm Sunday is that the events of Holy Week present us with an event that is both ancient and as contemporary as this morning's newspaper. To be sure, we are now talking about an event that took place two thousand years ago. The characters of that drama are indeed momentous. That week in Jerusalem brought together some of the most powerful forces one could imagine. Rome was there with all its imperial power. One of the world's great religions was also present, even as a new religion was emerging. It was certainly a defining moment in ancient history.

But there is something extraordinarily contemporary about the events of that first Holy Week. One of the hymns we sing in Holy Week is the moving spiritual "Where You There When They Crucified My Lord?" Harry Emerson Fosdick once pointed out the incongruity of that question. Can you imagine asking the question of some other death? Were you there when they killed Julius Caesar? Where you there when John Wilkes Booth assassinated Abraham Lincoln? Were you there when John Kennedy died in Dallas, Texas?

As Fosdick points out, there is a sense in which all of us were present when Jesus was killed. All of the major factors in that tragedy involve you and me. The blindness of religious leaders who were jealous of Jesus and could not see some new truth, the selfishness of a business community that tried to protect the profitable trading in the temple, the treachery of Judas who betrayed his master for thirty pieces of silver, the political shrewdness of Pontius Pilate, who wanted to save Jesus, but who finally washed his hands of the whole matter. Who of us was not there?

Several years ago, I walked the streets of Jerusalem. I remember particularly the “stations of the cross” that millions of pilgrims have walked through the centuries. As I thought about the events of that momentous week, there was not one unusual sin involved in the death of Jesus. It was all our small, familiar, day-by-day sins that did it. Do you remember at the Last Supper how Jesus said to his disciples, “One of you will betray me,” and all of them asked, “Is it I?” So, we walk these days of Holy Week asking the same question, “Is it I?”

III.

There is another paradox present on this Palm Sunday. The crucifixion of Jesus is one of the most heinous crimes ever inflicted on any individual, and yet it is an event that has elevated and dignified human worth more than any event in human history.

There is a stark horror to the cross. Some have called it the “loneliest death in all of human history.” Jesus was rejected by his own people as a traitor. The Roman soldiers had beaten him and mocked him. Pilate had washed his hands of the whole affair. His disciples had abandoned him. The cross was a horrible affair.

And yet, here is the paradox. The cross of Christ has elevated the dignity and worth of individuals more than any other event in human history. The New Testament speaks of individuals as the “ones for whose sake Christ has died.” So the same cross that revealed the worst in nature now reveals its best. That is a strange paradox indeed.

In the seventeenth century there is a story about a humanist scholar by the name of Muretus, a fugitive from France who once fell ill in Italy. He was poorly dressed and asked for aid from the doctors who were called to treat him. The physicians discussed the case among themselves in Latin, not thinking that this bedraggled pauper could understand their learned tongue. “*Faciamus experimentum in anima vili,*” they said, “Let us try an experiment on this worthless creature.” To their amazement this worthless creature responded to them in Latin: “*Vilem animam appellas pro qua Christus no didignatus est morti?*” – “Will you call worthless one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?”

There is no more important principle for the church than this. Because Christ died for each person, each person is important. That means there is no life outside the reach of God’s grace. Every single ministry of our church grows out of the belief that each person is important—whether that person is rich or poor, black or white, sick or well—all of us matter for Christ died for all of us. As the Apostle Paul put it, “Where sin abounded, grace abounded even more.”

IV.

There is another paradox for this Palm Sunday: that the crucifixion of Christ was the worst thing that could have happened to Jesus, and it was also the best.

Suffice it to say that Jesus had seen crucifixions in his lifetime. When he was a boy in Nazareth, an insurrection broke out in Sepphoris, barely five miles away. The historian Josephus tells us that two thousand men were crucified along the roadside. Jesus had witnessed this. No wonder he prayed in Gethsemane, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me."

And yet, look at the results of the death of Christ. "It became him," writes the author of Hebrews, "in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings."

It would be easy to argue that crucifixion was imposed upon Christ. But that was not the case at all. He chose it. "I lay down my life," says Jesus in John's gospel. "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own."

There is something of this that touches our lives as well. Often disappointment, heartache, and failure lead us in new directions we might not have ever imagined. The great artist Whistler wanted to be a soldier. He attended West Point but could not pass Chemistry. "If silicone had been a gas," he once said, "I would have been a major general."

How many times have we seen deep trouble spring forth in great triumph? Jesus did that. We say we adore and love Christ. But that is not the whole story. There is something about him that terrifies us, "If any would come after me," he said, "let that person deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

V.

Then finally, there is this paradox. The cross that appeared to be a blatant, cruel, a violent denial of God, because the supreme revelation of God. I believe that one of the reasons that the cross has become the center piece of our faith is that it affirms for us the strange and enigmatic nature of human life. I wonder what good would Christianity be to us today, if all we had were the lovely stories of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, with adoring wise men and angel choirs. Unfortunately, these stories, powerful though they may be are hardly adequate for the tests that life brings to us. Life is often mysterious, baffling tragic, and cruel. The cross confronts us with that and assures us that nothing—not even death itself can separate us from God's love in Christ.

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Speak What We Feel (and not what we think we ought to say)*, refers to the ambiguous ending of Shakespeare's great play, *King Lear*. There are those who see the ending as pure tragedy. Lear stands in the midst of the howling storm, holding the dead body of Cordelia, the one daughter that did not betray him. Others see the ending of the play on a redemptive note. Lear, at the end, finally becomes in death the king he could never be in life.

Perhaps Shakespeare intended that way. It leaves the choice to us. We can view life as tragic or we can see in it some possibility of redemption.

The cross of Christ offers us that same choice. We can face it in complete hopelessness or we can see in it the greatest victory ever won. But in the face of the cross one cannot be indifferent.

That is why we sing:

“When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the prince of glory died.
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.”

Amen.