

Palm Sunday  
March 16, 2008

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*Scriptures: Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 21:12-17, 23-27*

Palm Sunday is a very interesting day in the church year. Some years ago, for reasons I am not entirely in agreement with, the folks who put together the readings for each Sunday decided to make the Sunday that begins Holy Week do double duty. It would serve as Palm Sunday, the day that we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. And it would serve as Passion Sunday, a day to read the entire Passion narrative. The logic being that many people didn't attend services on Thursday or Friday, so in order to hear the whole story we would have to do it for them on Palm Sunday. I have no idea what they propose to do for folks who only show up for Christmas and Easter, but that is another story.

Needless to say, I disagree with this approach. I don't think we need to treat adults as if they were children. I think we can let Holy Week be Holy Week, and take the time to let the events unfold as they actually did for Jesus and his followers. We can, indeed, we must, take the time to let the events of this sacred time speak to our hearts, work on our souls. In a fast food, microwave, cell phone, instant-everything world, we have to face the fact that it takes time to let the Spirit speak to our deepest needs. I am not going to short-change you of that opportunity. We will read the entire Passion Narrative; part of it on Thursday night, and the rest on Friday night. If you want to take the time to hear this sacred story again and let it work in your life, it is here for you. Just not all of it this morning.

For today, I want to focus on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and the big picture of what happened next. As we read outside, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem must have been quite a spectacle. One can imagine the commotion, of crowds gathering, throwing down their cloaks to make a path for Jesus. The shouting "Hosanna, Hosanna" In my mind's eye I can almost see the children running and squealing with excitement as they picked up on the energy of the adults, even though they likely understood little of the significance of this man on a donkey.

And actually, the donkey all by itself could be the sermon for today. Everything about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem spoke of kingly power, triumphant return of a victorious king. Everything, that is, except the donkey. A donkey was a lowly beast of burden. Even all but the poorest could afford a donkey. Kings were supposed to ride stallions, or be pulled around in fancy chariots. What is up with this donkey? Jesus was king, but a very different sort of king. What that meant, and how true that was, was yet to be revealed.

Once Jesus came into Jerusalem, according to the Gospel text for today, he came to the Temple. This was the seat of power of the religious authorities of the day. This was where the people came to make their offerings and sacrifices. And in Jesus' day it was just as corrupt and exploitative as the Roman governing arm. No wonder Jesus turned over tables and drove out the money changers. The common people who had just been

shouting “Hosannas” probably wanted only to shout even louder. Here was one who stood up to the oppressors no matter who they were. All that table turning only set the stage for the first of many confrontations between the Temple authorities, the chief priests, the elders, who came out to see who was this troublemaker. No doubt, they were intent on quieting him as soon and as smoothly as possible.

Now, I have sort of a special problem with this last part of the Gospel text for today. Many years ago I read a little essay based on this text. That essay, by Martin Bell, entitled, “The Counterquestion” so completely defined this text that it is nearly impossible for me to think anything else when I encounter the text again. So, with your permission, I would like to read it.

“There he is. In the temple again. Causing trouble. Speaking very differently from other preachers. Speaking with authority about sorrow, anxiety, sickness and death. Penetrating the darkest corners of human existence. Shattering illusion. Make no mistake about it; this is a dangerous man.

The Christ Event. Jesus of Nazareth. The man for others, whose words cut through our most stubborn defenses and expose the whole of humanity in its nakedness. The fugitive who confronts us with direct authority. The one in whose presence the lame rise up and walk. The poor are comforted. The eyes of the blind are opened. The diseased are healed. Who would dare even to speak his name for fear of the consequences?

But now as he comes into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people approach him and say, "By what authority are you doing these things?" Have they no fear at all? No sense of the mystery?

For a moment Jesus is silent. Only his eyes betray impatience. Then suddenly a counterquestion: "What do you think about John the Baptist? Was he the instrument of God in history or a charlatan?"

The question is disturbing and exceedingly difficult to answer. John the Baptist is considered by the general populace to have been a prophet. It would be easier to reply that John was the instrument of God in history – not a charlatan in any sense. The problem with this answer is that Jesus will immediately ask why they did not repent and believe what John had said. On the other hand, to say that John was a charlatan would be to incur the wrath of the people.

The chief priests and the elders will not risk either answer. The compromise that they decide upon is to say, "Who knows? Who knows whether John was the instrument of God or a charlatan? We can't say!"

Jesus doesn't even look at them. Now he is ready to answer their question about authority. "Who knows?" he says, "Who knows by what authority I do these things? I can't say!"

The chief priests deserve that. The elders should have known better than to ask the question in the first place. If they are not willing to risk themselves, what difference will it make what Jesus says?

Instead of answering the chief priests and the elders directly, Jesus asks a

counterquestion. If his assailants admit that John the Baptist acted and preached on divine authority, then they must be prepared to reorder their lives according to what John had called for. That is to say, they must commit themselves. If, on the other hand, they believe that John was a fanatic and a charlatan, they must be prepared to say so – no matter how unpopular such an opinion might be. Once again, to answer the question implies commitment.

For timid and cautious men who are unwilling to take the risk involved in either answer, the only possible response is, "Who knows?"

But then, what is there left for Jesus to say? We do not know the Christ and then commit ourselves to him. Commitment is the one and only way by which we may know the Christ.

There he is. In the temple again. Causing trouble. Tearing away the shroud that surrounds careful and frightened men who have come to accept disillusionment as a way of life. Cutting to the heart of those who dare not trust anything or anyone until they are certain that this trust will not be violated. Holding up the absolute necessity of deciding before the lives of men who would prefer to remain on the sidelines as spectators and onlookers. Challenging the chief priests and the elders to adopt a responsible position, regardless of what it is! The Christ Event. Jesus of Nazareth. The man for others.

What do you think of John the Baptist? Was he God's instrument in history, or a charlatan? They have just fifteen seconds to decide.

What the chief priests and the elders do not realize is that life itself is inextricably bound to decision making. To live is to decide, to risk being wrong, to bet your life. Nothing could be more foreign to the ears of these analytical men who have come to observe the young man from Nazareth. Yet nothing could be more central to their understanding of what he is all about.

By what authority is he doing these things? That is the question. Good! But the deeper puzzle that must first be untangled is why they want to know anyway! What difference will it make? What risks are they prepared to take? Is this question really one of final seriousness for them? How ready are they to commit themselves before God?

And so, the counterquestion. What about John the Baptist? Prophet or madman?

To live is to decide, to risk being wrong, to bet your life. Life itself is inextricably bound to decision making. It is not enough to be interested in this man, or fascinated by him or drawn to him. Either we stand ready to commit our deaths to him or we don't. No one ever knows the Christ and then commits himself. Commitment is the one and only way by which we may know the Christ.

By what authority is he doing these things? What do you think? Is he the one to whom all power in heaven and on earth is given, or is he an invented dream of human longing?

Yes or no? To live is to decide, to risk being wrong. It is not enough to be interested in, or fascinated by Jesus of Nazareth. It is not enough to be frightened, cautious, and bewildered spectators. Curiosity about the Christ Event in history is not enough. Either

we stand ready to commit our deaths or we don't.

Actually, it shouldn't be all that frightening. Everyone has to die anyway. It's not as if there were some other option. Each of us must die. That's a given. That's just the way it is. What is not part of the given is the how, or the why, or the what for of your death. What you are going to die for is not a given. What your death is going to be about is up to you.

So what do you think? By what authority is he doing these things? The chief priests and the elders will not risk themselves. It is clear that they are not really serious about wanting to know. Although they are interested in Jesus, even fascinated by him, the ecclesiastical dignitaries are not ready to commit their deaths to anything or anyone.

But what about you? What is your answer? It's all very well to say, "God knows!" But such an evasion cannot suffice. God never has to decide. Men do.

There he is. In the temple again. Causing trouble. The broken one who cuts through our most stubborn defenses and demands that we place our lives on the line. The fugitive who confronts us with direct authority. Make no mistake about it; this is a dangerous man." (from "The Way of the Wolf" by Martin Bell. Copyright 1968)

Palm Sunday, more than any other Sunday, is the day that I am confronted by the fact that as Jesus passed through the world, as he moved from village to village, some – actually make that most – came out to see what all the commotion was about, and then they blithely went back to work, back to their lives. Jesus might have been interesting, or fascinating. But there were chores to do. It was only a few who let their daily routines be up-ended. Only a few let their lives be changed forever.

Palm Sunday is the day I am confronted by the question of whether or not I really believe this stuff. Does this Jesus of Nazareth make any difference in my life or not? There is precious little about my life that looks like I am anything other than a typical middle-class, middle-age female US citizen. I and millions of other Christians in our culture today might sing, "Change my heart, oh God" but being un-consciously adding, "But not too much."

I have had that feeling especially on Wednesday evenings. We have been discussing the various aspects of global economic injustice. And I am alternately numb as the massiveness of the problems, and appalled at the calmness with which we discuss. Part of me thinks, if I allowed myself to really feel the connectedness that I share with those who suffer, I might find myself taking a one-way flight to another country, or driving to my senator's office and starting a protest. Surely I would do something. But instead I find myself looking for the right words to pray, the right way to close out the evening. So that we can what? So we can all come back the next week and do it all over again?

On Palm Sunday I find myself confronted by the fact that, for the most part, my Christianity isn't particularly dangerous to anyone. (Except maybe to those who suffer and who wait for responsible citizens of the world to take note and do something on their behalf. My inaction is dangerous for them.)

On Palm Sunday, I wave my palm. I might even shout “Hosanna” in a symbolic act of welcoming Jesus as King in my life. But as I step back a little and see how much further it goes, I find myself in need of confession.

I confess that I am not dangerous at all. I am driven to my knees by the thought that I too easily get back to my chores as Jesus passes on to the next village, in search of followers who will follow, who will allow their lives to be irrevocably changed. I don’t know where else to go, except to ask forgiveness for my attachment to the things of my life. For my timid-ness. For my lack of vision, courage, compassion.

My one, my only, comfort for this burden of my inability to follow Jesus as others might, is this: the sure and certain knowledge that God does not want us on our knees groveling over what we did or did not do. God had never been a fan of watching us beat ourselves up with “mea culpa, mea culpa.” God is not interested in prolonged guilt and shame. Only enough to get us to change direction, to turn our lives around and live a new way.

God doesn’t want us on our knees groveling, but on our feet, working, moving, making a difference in whatever ways are available to us. That is what the forgiveness is for. So we can get off our knees, onto our feet, into the streets, the hospitals, the classrooms, the town hall meetings, to the computer, to wherever we can make a difference, wherever we can maybe even just worry someone a little bit.

So what about you? What do you say?

“There he is. In the temple again. Causing trouble. The broken one who cuts through our most stubborn defenses and demands that we place our lives on the line. The fugitive who confronts us with direct authority. Make no mistake about it; this is a dangerous man.”  
Amen.