



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

PALM CROSS

Sermon for Palm/Passion Sunday, March 29, 2015

Readings: Mark 11:1-11; Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalm 39; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47

Sermon texts: Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Mark 11:10);

Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” They shouted back, “Crucify him!” (Mark 15:12)

A dear friend of mine from my previous parish suffered a nearly fatal heart attack on the day of his daughter’s wedding. As he was being carried to the hospital and open heart surgery, he insisted that the wedding go on, but you can imagine the mixed feelings of concern and joy that went on that day. Years later, unfortunately, that marriage fell apart. The man proved abusive and domineering but my friend was able to help his daughter through the messy divorce and start a new life. He was able to be present when I presided over her marriage to her high school sweetheart, a widower, and witness the flourishing of his grandchildren. He died a few months ago, and again there was sorrow—but mixed with relief that he was free from suffering and an outpouring from the whole community of love and appreciation for a life well lived.

In comedy, all’s well that ends well; in tragedy: what looks like good fortune ends disastrously. But life is not a single dramatic genre—it is a combination of comedy and tragedy, melodrama and farce. Laughter and tears. Like this service, a combination of hope and cowardly fear, joy and punishing sorrow, love and hate. Palms and crosses.

The people of Israel, crowded into the capital for Passover hailed Jesus as the Messiah. He seemed to fit the bill. He had proclaimed the coming of the kingdom. He'd performed miracles. He entered Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling prophecy—and was hailed by the crowd lining the streets, waving psalm, pledging fidelity: 'Hosanna, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.' But the love of the crowd was but a crush that faded and spoiled in the next few days. Malice, gossip and fear took over. Like the good seed planted in rocky or weedy soil, the faith of the crowd sprouted quickly and was just as quickly overcome. Jesus' enemies moved decisively: arranging for Judas to betray him, engineering his arrest, trial and appearance before Pilate for judgment. Pilate as the Roman governor could care a less about Jewish politics and prophecy, except if it threatened Roman rule. But a new "king of the Jews" was clearly a threat.

What might have happened if Jesus had called upon his followers to rise up and fight? Well, we have a pretty good idea, because some thirty years later, in the year 70, another man came to town hailed as the messiah, this time supported by the leading rabbi of the time, Akiba. The people rose up and killed the Roman garrison. The kingdom of Israel was free and independent. For about a year or two. Then general Tiberius—later emperor—came back with the full force of the Roman empire and crushed the rebellion. Jerusalem was sacked, the Temple reduced to rubble, the people slaughtered. The last holdouts perished by their own hand in the desert stronghold of Masada some years later. That was the Roman way of rule: never let rebellion go unpunished.

And that was just what the high priest and the elders were afraid of. That's why Caiaphas said it was better that one person perish than the whole people. And so the leaders mobilized gossip and agitators to declare Jesus an impostor, and to raise a call for his crucifixion during the judgment of Pilate.

Those who had shouted "Hosanna!" now cried with equal fervor, "Crucify him!"

But those who called for Jesus to die conspired to kill the Son of God, the most holy person the world has known. Neither he nor Pilate can wash their hands of their responsibility

It is tragic, rather like the imperial police officer in Burma forced by crowd pressure and his own role as supposed authority into "Shooting an Elephant"—in George Orwell's insightful essay of that title. In this essay, Orwell realizes the tragic lack of freedom that binds both "sahibs" and "natives" in the colonial empire. Just so, some of the Jewish and

Roman leaders may not have wanted to kill Jesus, but felt forced by the crowd as it threatened to become a mob and an uprising. In the larger sense, then, it was the crowd that killed Jesus. It was the people, not the leaders. It was us, we are their descendants.

For we are members of the crowd—we take that part in the Palm procession and the Passion reading. Of course, we weren't there, we didn't cry for Christ to be crucified, any more than we actually waved palm branches and laid our cloaks on the ground for him to ride over. We are happy to be part of a church congregation, not the unruly mob that called for the blood of the Son of God.

We don't like to think of ourselves as so easily led and so lightly committed.

Nor do we wish to be one of the disciples who fled for fear, nor, even more, the one who betrayed his master and friend. Indeed, no one had a very good showing that week except some of the women and maybe the disciple John. I assume that I would do no better than Peter.

We are social animals and unless we are governed by a clear and steady set of moral principles and spiritual touchstones, we become part of a group mind that can oppose the will of God and the way of Jesus. We can scarcely avoid being part of the modern media led crowd, puffed up first with gassy enthusiasm and then disenchanted and cynical, even vengeful and out for blood when our groundless hopes prove empty.

Look at the media frenzies of our day, the rush to judgment, the quick deciding of sides and the blood sport of political demagoguery.

But contrast the crowd and the disciples during Holy Week with the crowd and the disciples on the day of Pentecost—fifty days after the resurrection of Easter.

Peter and the disciples turned from hiding from fear to being filled with the Holy Spirit, from defeated losers to bold evangelists fired up with courage and faith to go out and conquer the world through proclamation and self-sacrifice. Persecution, death? They faced it all and won eternal glory.

The crowd—remorseful when confronted with the realization that they had helped crucify the true messiah—asked, fearfully, what could they do? Repent and become baptized, Peter told them— and so 3000 were baptized right then and

there, the start of a movement with enduring power and growth. Here we are today, their descendants also.

So here is the takeaway. One, have faith: God is with you, Christ has gone before to lead the way. Whatever you are going through in your life—and it can feel terrible—it can be dying—is part of an eternal life of birth, death and resurrection. We are an Easter people. Have faith.

But don't forget we are a Palm Sunday Good Friday people too: prone to sin, ignorance and fear. We can be, and sometimes are enemies of God. We make wrong, hasty and crowd-driven choices. Expect that. Plan on being wrong—and see what you can do to minimize it. And don't be too judgmental, on others or yourself.

Remember Jesus on the cross, who said, “forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they are doing.”

And finally, remember that you a Pentecost people. Be filled with the Holy Spirit and ride out in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

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