

Sermon, 1 April 2007—Palm Sunday, Sunday of the Passion
Isaiah 45:21-5; Psalm 22; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:39—23:56

The liturgy of Palm Sunday grinds its gears more abrasively than any other in the Christian Year. It matches the events that Jesus' disciples lived through. Are we to be happy? The triumphal entry suggests that. We hear a story of enthusiastic followers, cheering and waving palms, anticipating the triumphant self-disclosure of God's Messiah. Finally, Jesus is where he belongs: the City of David, the Holy City. After centuries of oppression by Babylonians, by Persians, by Greeks, by Romans, here, every faithful Jew might have hoped, arrives the fulfillment of God's promises. Jesus can become what he is supposed to be so the Jewish people can become what they are promised to be. Finally, everything is aligned. This boastful defiant tumult no doubt caught the attention of the Roman occupying forces. Jesus, however, as we know, had no interest in displacing Rome militarily. The sovereignty of God is not cramped by Empire. Imperial power can do nothing to limit or defeat it. There is no contest here.

But that freedom from political domination depends on a deep direct relationship with God. Jesus understands himself in Luke as the crowning and final prophet, meant to call the people of Israel to a more radical, a more simple, fidelity to their covenant with God. As with numerous prophets before him, Jeremiah in particular, this call for a spiritual renaissance always involves a condemnation of the self-important rituals of the religious hierarchy. Not only is that an unwelcome message to the Temple priests, Jesus acts out this spiritual purification by cleansing the Temple, driving out those who sold animals and changed money there, and by defeating every

challenge to his authority as a teacher. No wonder deep hidden disappointments and resentments surface with murderous intent.

Today, we put our bodies through that same wrenching readjustment, by imitating the events of 2000 years ago. We hold palms, walk around, and sing a triumphant song of praise. But once we enter the Sanctuary, as Jesus did the Temple, Scripture confronts us, as Jesus did the religious figures of his day, with statements that shake and offend us, culminating in the Passion narrative. This is not what we come to church for. This is not a brief anecdote about Jesus excised from one of the Gospels for touching and edifying commentary, but a reading longer and more horrifying than any other that we listen to in worship. Naive hopefulness is over. Everything stops for a story that at the very least is morbid and tragic, but that even at its best we wish we could repudiate. This is not what we want as followers of Christ. We leave unsettled, as we should.

Talking will not ease this tension, because Holy Week cannot be explained away. We will only comprehend it by participation. We will only grasp it when we continue to bring our bodies, night after night, to these events. We will share a meal as Jesus did. Some will hold out their feet to be washed, and others will be tempted to say, as Peter did, “you will never wash my feet!” We will remain restless, moving from room to room. We will watch the altar being stripped as Jesus was stripped before the cross. We will spend time staring at a wooden cross. We will gather in the dark and hold candles. We will listen to more Scripture than we do at any other point in the Church Year. We will gather around a stone bowl and remember a tomb carved out of the rock. As everyone who hopes to deal with reality knows, the only way out is through.

Holy Week is always a struggle at the limits of what we find endurable. If we are alert, we enter into a zone of discomfort for which we are never ready. We try to watch for at least one hour while someone we love is in agony. We try to remain steady while someone we admire despairs and dies. We try to find hope as someone we follow reaches a dead end. We wonder what faithfulness means as we try to hold ourselves steady. Holy Week is about knowing the worst, not only in the life of Christ, but in our own life, so we can also know what God has overcome.

More is caught up in all this, than we can put into words, because it is not about understanding, but about participating, witnessing, accompanying. Whether it offends or grieves us, we hear it and watch it and take it in and let ourselves suffer the wound. We hold on until we are ready to grasp this truth: if God is not limited by anything that happened to Jesus, then God cannot be defeated by anything that can happen to us.

The joy Jesus' disciples felt, entering Jerusalem with palm branches, is overturned before it can return, but it does return. A deeper fuller joy dawns. It is deeper and fuller because it is affirmed by One who knows that, though the former joy is wounded, it survives transformed. What other proof is needed that the joy of Christ and the truth of Christ have a deeper root than the enthusiasm of his followers? God cannot be driven out. The wounds of the Resurrected Body are themselves the proof that the social systems that first acclaimed and then destroyed Jesus do not define him. God is his backer; God is his guarantor. Our expectations or illusions of what our common life is do not determine that common life. God is the underwriter of the Church. The wounds we witness in Holy Week, though they bring on a painful death and end in a desolate burial, are, in God's healing hands, transformed into glorious scars and an empty tomb. Those

scars are signs of what we might have feared, but what turned out to have no power over us at all in the end, because the ultimate power is God's. What held and holds Jesus' followers together is neither expectations of triumph nor illusions of security and safety, but the ultimate costly love of God.

Our role is simply to be faithful witnesses. It may be that the tragedy of Jesus' rejection will break our heart. It may be that our own mortality will hover in front of us. It may be that the pain of the shattering of the community that had traveled with Jesus for three years will echo in the brokenness of communities we know. It may be that our unlikely redemption will disturb us or even—God willing!—that its victory will strengthen us.

All I can offer you is this. We cannot go where Christ has not gone before us. We will not find ourselves where Christ cannot be recognized. Whether we are wounded by betrayal or terrified by death or abandoned by God, nothing we go through is alien to him. All we must do is acknowledge what we recognize in his pain and what we identify as our own cross, if we are to find the seals of our tomb burst apart for us also.

Let us pray. Gracious God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord.