

Sermon, 16 March 2008—Palm Sunday

Isaiah 45:21-5; Psalm 22; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:36—27:66

For several weeks now we have sat in silence as the great catechetical Gospel readings from John were read slowly, broken up by questions, so we could reflect on them. Today we have heard what the Church has long thought best that we hear in its entirety, the Passion of the Messiah Jesus, interrupted by our exclamations, so we could identify with it. John's stories guide us from the incomprehension of Nicodemus to the conversion of the Samaritan woman, and then through two depictions of what it is like to know Christ: our eyes will be opened and our life will be restored. Those stories are designed to increase in scope and meaning, culminating in the stirring glory of that final miracle, when Lazarus stumbles forward in his shroud out of the tomb into which he was sealed four days before. If we have been attentive, we will be, as Jesus' disciples were, eager for what is next, believing ourselves courageous and committed. But we arrive today at the depiction of Jesus' final hours—the most difficult of all the Gospel extracts to listen to—and, if we have been attentive, we will be, as Jesus' disciples were, stunned and horrified and disoriented.

This, I believe, is the point, and I have two things to say about it.

First, consider what the disciples went through that week. At the opening of our service, we recalled, not only their excitement, but the explosive euphoria of the crowd in Jerusalem. Jesus had arrived where all believed he was destined to be: the Son of David had reached the City of David. He was fulfilling all that had been foretold about the Messiah. He had come to his own. The hope that had been incubated for so many years was about to crack open and God's vindicating glory was to emerge.

This lip-biting blood-racing fist-pumping grinning exhilaration was swept aside with the tables of the money-changers in the Temple; the disciples' confidence was expelled along with the complacency of those who bought and sold animals in the Court of the Gentiles. Suddenly, they find Jesus surrounded by hostility. He is baited, but not trapped—and every time he outmaneuvers his opponents, he shames them. The disciples are brought to realize that, far from recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, the Temple authorities withdraw in rage when they cannot even answer Jesus' questions about how the Messiah could be the Son of David. If the religious leaders have recoiled, it is in order to strike to kill.

But the Feast of Passover will fall within a few days. Jesus' ambitious followers perhaps felt that perhaps Jesus was waiting for those days, when all the Jews gather to tell again the story of their liberation from bondage in Egypt. Surely during that feast Jesus would reveal himself as the new Moses who would lead the people in a new liberation from submission to Rome. Perhaps, when they asked where they should prepare the Passover meal, they asked for his directions with eagerness. They had all the faith necessary to believe in him and follow him, but that meant they had faith in what he could become for them and provide for them.

Instead, that night, rather than unveil his plans for the nation, Jesus exposes a plot within their own community: one of them will betray him. One of *them*! Once that happens, he says, they will all abandon him. *All* of them! This insight, so painful as prediction, comes to seem brutal in its clarity when it comes to pass. We know the story, so we can hardly imagine the disciples' humiliation and terror in Gethsemane. Exactly what Jesus describes takes place: betrayal, denial, flight—self-preservation at all costs! Jesus does nothing to defend himself or escape. His humble acquiescence

shames his followers by exposing their cowardice as completely as his witty replies had exposed the puffed up arrogance of the Temple leaders.

It is possible that some expected that Jesus would erupt in triumph at the very last moment; perhaps that is why Peter followed him into the courtyard of Caiaphas. Once again, Jesus hardly defends himself; the same man who had returned every volley of his opponents in the Temple courts now lets hatred and deceit run its prefabricated artificial course. His enemies hand him over to the occupying forces, who nail him up as an insurrectionist, and his entire enterprise, along with all those who had invested their life in it, collapses.

What the disciples expected Jesus to be did not work out. Crucifixion is the antithesis of Messianic promises. Consider this again today. That truth, which Jesus himself articulated, that the Christ must be betrayed and abused and killed, remains true in our own day as well. We do not see it, because we have taken our theological interpretation as corrective and final, as permanent and eternal, as beyond reach. We are as eager to bind God to our interpretation as any people God has ever chosen has been eager to keep God from acting in unacceptable and unanticipated ways. I urge you today to consider the experience Jesus' followers had of his last days, and not the interpretation they gave them, as the saving activity of God.

We have explained to ourselves that a political Messiah was a mistaken assumption, brought to the person of Jesus by his fellow Jews, his contemporaries, galled under the Roman imperial yoke, crushed by the burden of Roman military occupation and crippling Roman taxes. Their eyes, we tell ourselves, were blinded by the cataracts of national legends: Joshua, Gideon, Deborah, Samson, David, and even the recent Maccabees. We know we do not make that mistake.

We also, along with Jesus' disciples, approach God with prepackaged expectations—but ours are psychological. We expect to be freed from oppression as well: no more fear, no more anger, no more loneliness, no more suffering, no more death. We are ready to recognize as our savior the one who can achieve these things for us. Our eyes also are blinded by holy legends: if not Brigid, Catherine, Teresa, Francis, and Ignatius, then these are the legendary recalling of holy events, holy sensations, holy encounters, enthusiasms, convictions, tears, consolations, which we try to repeat for ourselves and try to conjure up for others, all clutched to our chest as a talisman against the terror of the void. To us as well, Jesus says, “what is promised to you by God, what you long for, what is to set you free from bondage, will arrive with the purpose of being destroyed, so that nothing will stand between you and God; and what appears to be your sin, as you yourselves betray and deny what is promised, is your cooperation with God in the smashing of this idol, so that God himself can lure you out into the wilderness to woo you.”

What happens when the way things are supposed to work, the right answers, the solutions, especially in religion, go wrong and fail us? The crucified Messiah is the indication that these moments, which we are afraid are failures, *are* God's way. The deeper flow of our spirit is never about locking in on a right answer. Whenever we try to do that, our ambition, which we take great care not to know about ourselves, is to play our piety out for our own security. The flaw is the same, whatever your absolutism: you can believe you are just as right about your version of Jesus as the disciples thought they were about theirs. This is not a situation where *they* were wrong, but *we* now have the corrected revelation from God. It is the

same situation: it is the eager impatience to lock God in to our advantage, which God shatters for our health and our salvation.

You see, the way of God is the way of disillusion, because God will tolerate no idol, not even the one we try to make of His own Son. That is why we hear Jesus say that he lays his life down freely; Jesus himself will not allow himself to become a barrier between us and God. Our desire to be taken out of our life, our hankering for a rescuer, is what must be destroyed; only then will we be free to be with God. The stumbling block of our frustration and disappointment becomes the unfathomable and life-giving abyss of the empty tomb. And our deepest depth cooperates with this disillusion, because the truth will set us free.

So, dear sisters and brothers, when you study Holy Week, remember that its message is for us what it was for Jesus' first followers: the Messiah whom we expect to bring our dreams to perfection, whose glorification is our aggrandizement, and whom we trust only for that purpose, is savaged and sacrificed, so that our expectations can die and our hopes come to life.

So I now can make my second point.

Become a witness of God's mighty acts this week. Let what governs your life be crucified; let your dreams shatter and consider what is before you when you are awake.

It is not enough to come in with palms. If we are paying attention on Palm Sunday, we do receive a salutary shock: our celebration becomes disillusion. But this entry is not the full journey. Jesus took water and bowed before the feet of those he believed he knew, one of whom would betray him so that God's purposes could be fulfilled, and he washed those feet. You can shape your body into that bow. Jesus was brought face to face with his cross, from which he knew he would never descend alive. You

can present your body to face that silence. Jesus moved then from darkness to light. You can move your body also, following the light of Christ into the celebration that is beyond our comprehension, as all life is beyond our grasp. Enter with joy into the contemplation of those mighty acts, whereby God has given us life and immortality.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, whose most dear Son 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, your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever.