

A PALM SUNDAY BLESSING

(04/01/12)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 118:1-9, 21-29
John 12:1-19

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” (Psalm 118:26)

I like doing my banking at the bank I have used for many years in downtown Foxborough. For one thing, since I have my business checking in addition to our personal checking with them, the tellers call me “Dr. Sanderson.” That makes me feel important. The second reason is because of the conversations I have had through the years with one of the tellers, a woman who is from India. Mampta, who is a follower of the Sikh religion, always greets me by folding her hands, bowing slightly and saying *Namaste*.

Namaste means something like “I recognize the holy in you.” I like this greeting. It is more spiritual than “Hi” or “Howdy” or even “Good morning,” though the latter contains a wish that the person will experience a good morning. Mampta also taught me a Sikh greeting in Punjabi: *Sat Sri Akal*. *Sri* is an honorific title like “Lord.” *Sat* means truth. *Akal* means the Timeless Being or God. It witnesses to the belief that God is the ultimate truth. The greeting expresses the belief that eternal blessings come to those who know that God is the ultimate truth.

As Father Conrad explained in his talk on Islam at our United Parishes of Southborough Lenten Series, a Muslim from the same area of northwestern India as the Punjab province would say *Assalam alaikum* or *Assalam mu alaikum*, which is a more formal address, like using “sie” instead of “du” in German. This greeting means “Peace be with you.” The person addressed would answer *Waa alaikum assalam* or “Peace be with you, too.” Once again, the greeting is actually a blessing.

When our family lived in southern Germany the year that I was studying in Switzerland, we initially followed the Berlitz handbook directive to say *Guten Tag* when we met or greeted someone. This means “Good day,” which is a nice thing to wish for another person. After we got a puzzled look from several people and a muttered response that I couldn’t understand, one of our friends explained that the customary greeting in that province of Germany is *Gruss Gott*. *Gruss Gott* means something like “I greet you in God” or “God’s greeting.” Once again, the greeting is actually a blessing.

All of these greetings arise from the awareness that all meeting is holy meeting, that God is present even in the casual encounter of two strangers on the road.

Over time religiously based greetings tend to become ritualized and lose the impact of their original vision, at least in our culture. They go the way of “Godspeed” or *Adios*. When I was a teenager a disc jockey on one of the Boston radio stations used to close his broadcast by saying *Vios con Dios* which means “Go with God” or “Travel with God.” Then he would add, “And you couldn’t have better company.” We certainly wouldn’t allow anything as offensive as that to be broadcast on our radio stations today. But Howard Stern is ok.

The customary Jewish greeting of Jesus’ day was either *Shalom*, which means peace, or the more formal “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” This phrase, as we heard this morning, comes from Psalm 118. As the king approached the temple to offer a gift of thanksgiving, the priests would say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

By the time of Jesus, this phrase had become the standard greeting for pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for a festival. As travelers streamed into the city, people would say to them, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” The blessing conveyed the sense of welcoming the pilgrim to Jerusalem and expressing the hope that he would enjoy the festival.

So when Mark tells us that the crowds greeted Jesus with “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” we can be confident that he was not the only pilgrim to hear these words. This particular greeting or blessing did not mark Jesus out as special. Until, as recorded in the Gospel of John, the crowd added a single line: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!”

From this addendum, where the crowd hails Jesus as the King of Israel, we realize that they had special expectations of Jesus. Reports of how Jesus had brought Lazarus back from the grave had spread throughout the land, and, as we heard, these rumors were of particular concern to the Pharisees. Whereas the Pharisees probably dreaded Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem, the common people eagerly awaited his arrival.

With regard to the crowd’s expectations, the palm branches they waved were even more significant than the words they uttered. Palm branches were a nationalistic symbol. The waving of palm branches was an expression of hope that this young Galilean, who had stirred up so

much attention, might strike a blow for the nation, a blow against Rome and for the freedom, the liberation of his homeland.

As we know, the crowd soon realized that what they expected from Jesus was not what they received. Jesus did not fulfill their expressed wants or desires. If only the crowd had remembered the words of a classic Rolling Stones' song entitled "You Can't Always Get What You Want," they might have made a healthier adjustment to the experience of unrealized expectations. As the Stones tell us:

*You can't always get what you want,
but if you try,
sometime,
you just might find,
you get what you need.*

On that Passover so many years ago, the crowd did not get what it wanted -- a Messiah, a king, a national leader, but it did receive what it needed -- a savior. The crowd wanted Jesus to establish a kingdom modeled after his ancestor, King David. Think how surprised and disappointed they must have been when Jesus, responding to the inquisition by Pilate, clarified his intention by saying, "My kingdom is not of this world." They must have been sad, disappointed, and perhaps even a little annoyed.

Much to the disappointment of the crowd and some of his disciples, especially those who were Zealots, Jesus was not a revolutionary or freedom fighter, at least not in their meaning of the terms. He was, however, quite countercultural. He did not arrive accompanied by trappings of power, but lowly, riding on a donkey. He did not come in the name of the nation, but in the name of the Lord. The irony of this apparently escaped the crowd.

Instead of a conquering hero, the crowd got a suffering servant. Instead of a politician, it got a spiritual guide. The palm branches, which they waved with such fervor, turned out to represent a dashed hope for restored national power. The words which they uttered more as a custom than a conviction, turned out to signify the deeper truth, the truth that God, the Son of God, was in their midst.

"Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord." "The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you." "Lord have mercy." "Come, Lord Jesus." We say these phrases so often in worship and prayer, scarcely knowing what we are saying, hardly expecting anything to happen.

Then, at a time when we least expect, coming down the road of our life is the one for whom we have hungered and thirsted, Jesus Christ our Lord and savior.

What happened to the crowd can also happen to us. When we put down the palm branches of our expectations, which are often too small and self-centered, we can see the deeper reality that is in our midst. When we least expect our prayers to be answered, they are. When we least expect God to be present in our lives as individuals, as families, and as a church, God is there both within and among us.

In the silence of our communion service, let us open ourselves to the realization that God is present not only in this sacrament, not only in these moments of worship, but also in every human encounter. Let us remember that when we extend a greeting such as *Namaste* or *Sat Sri Akal* or *Gruss Gott* or *Assalam alaikum* or simply “Peace” to someone we meet, we witness to God’s presence in both the other person’s life and in our own.

In the silence of this communion service, let us open our hearts to the presence of “the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” the one who comes to save us and set us free. And may the peace that comes through the indwelling presence of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us in these moments of worship and in the days to come.

*A communion meditation offered by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
April 1, 2012*