THE PARADOX OF PALM SUNDAY

(03/20/16)

Scripture Lesson: John 12:1-26

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!” (John 12:12-13)

Today is Palm Sunday, a day of celebration. Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem marks the beginning of Holy Week, one of the most profound and deeply symbolic weeks in human history. Churches distribute palms to their communicants on this day, sometimes as palm branches, sometimes in other forms. This morning, I would like us to reflect on the symbolism of the palm cross that we distribute--its meaning for Jesus and its meaning for us.

What happened on the day we know as Palm Sunday? Although Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem is recorded in all four gospels, only the Gospel of John mentions palms. Matthew and Mark tell us that some people in the crowd cut leafy branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Luke relates that people spread their cloaks, not branches, on the road before Jesus. John says that the people “took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him.”

What is the symbolism of the palm? The palm tree, which is known for its longevity as well as its beauty, was a symbol of long life. It was also a symbol of the revolution against Rome, the hope that Jesus would be the political and military as well as religious leader that would free the Israelites from the yoke of Roman oppression.

If the palms welcomed the one whom the people believed was the Messiah for whom they longed, the one of the House of David who would unite Israel and rule as David had done, that hope was soon dashed. Jesus did not turn out to be the Messiah. In fact, there is scant evidence that he ever thought of himself this way. The kingdom of God that was the focus of his teaching, the kingdom that he hoped to usher in was a spiritual, not a political kingdom.

Whatever their original significance, palms have come to symbolize Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of Holy Week. They evoke feelings of celebration, honor and triumph. Some churches celebrate this day by having a procession around the church sanctuary. The ashes that are obtained from the burning of leftover palms become the ashes that are distributed on the following Ash Wednesday.
In our church we generally distributed palm crosses rather than branches on Palm Sunday. The proceeds from the sale of these crosses, which are made by the inhabitants of an African village, help them build hospitals and schools, obtain food and clean water. The purchase of these palm crosses is yet another part of our mission outreach as a church.

The palm cross is deeply symbolic. It combines the palm, the symbol of honor, celebration and triumph, with the cross--a symbol of sadness, defeat, and death. The opposites, the opposites in the life of Jesus and our lives, are contained in this powerful symbol.

As I mentioned, some churches celebrate Palm Sunday with a procession around the sanctuary. Sometimes only the children process; sometimes it involves the entire congregation. It was my great misfortune many years ago to suddenly discover that I had inadvertently stumbled into such a church. At one point during the worship service we were told to get up from our seats and walk around the outside aisle of the sanctuary waving our palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna!” “Hosanna to the One who comes in the name of the Lord.”

All I wanted to do that morning was sit still in the pew next to my wife and reflect on the meaning of Palm Sunday in Jesus’ life and in my life. If you can imagine me processing around the outside aisle of the church waving my palm branch and shouting “Hosanna!” you will grasp that I was not a happy camper. I was not able to get myself into the mind set of the people who lined the sides of the road as Jesus entered Jerusalem--probably because I didn’t want to. I just wanted to sit in the pew, but Darlene insisted that participating in the parade was the right thing to do. I don’t remember the rest of the service. I have a suspicion that when I reached the back of the sanctuary I quietly sneaked out and went across the street for coffee.

Experiences like that in worship don’t help me get in touch with my feelings. They pull me out of my feelings. They may work for other people, but they don’t work for me. I would rather sit quietly and be present to my feelings, because my feelings on Palm Sunday are mixed. There is a shadow hanging over the celebration; the shadow of death.

This morning’s gospel reading is the account of Palm Sunday as recorded in the Gospel of John. The chapter begins with Jesus’ anointing. Six days before the Passover, Jesus pays a visit to Lazarus, whom he has raised from the dead. Lazarus lives in Bethany, a town less than a day’s journey from Jerusalem. While Jesus is at table, Mary takes a pound of costly perfume, anoints Jesus’ feet, and wipes them with her hair.
Judas objects to this waste of money. From a practical point of view, Judas is correct: the perfume could have been sold for three hundred denarii, approximately a year’s wages for a laborer, and the money given to the poor. Jesus tells him to leave Mary alone, for she is anointing him for his death. He predicts that in little more than a week she will bring the remainder of it to the tomb to prepare him for his burial.

So the week begins under the shadow of death. A shadow of sadness hangs over the day of celebration. Jesus knows what is to come. This coming Thursday evening, in our service of Tenebrae, we reflect on the events of Holy Week. Every step of the way, as we move closer to the cross, we extinguish one candle until finally the entire church is in darkness.

The following day Jesus enters Jerusalem. The crowds throng to see him. They hail him as the Messiah, the descendent of King David who would lead the rebellion against their Roman oppressors. However, this joyous procession was fraught with opposites. Instead of entering in a chariot, Jesus rides on the back of a donkey. Instead of being surrounded by legions of soldiers, Jesus is accompanied by twelve men and a few women. Instead of coming as a master who is to be served, Jesus presents himself as a servant, as a suffering servant.

As recorded in our gospel lesson, immediately following the triumphal entry Jesus shares one of his greatest teachings with his disciples. He tells them that unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it will not bear fruit. This is true not only of the events that will shortly occur; it is a profound truth about life. He says, “Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

The events that frame the triumphal entry are heavy with hints of death. The day is fraught with paradox, with the tension of opposites. This is why I like the symbolism of the palm cross.

The historical events of Holy Week speak to us. The deeper truths of Holy Week are not simply historical truths; they are also eternal truths, truths about life. As we participate in the events of Holy Week, we walk the path that Jesus walked. As people of faith, we do so, as Jesus did, knowing God walks this path with us.

Think about it. Isn’t the symbolism of the palm-cross true of life? Isn’t it true of our lives? We live our life in a world of opposites. There are moments of triumph and moments of defeat. There are moments of joy and moments of sadness. There are times of pleasure and pain.
we cannot escape, both physical and emotional pain. There are times when we feel strong and on
top of life and times when we feel weak and vulnerable.

As I look out on this congregation this morning, I can think of many examples of the
palm-cross. In our prayer, we raise up both celebrations and concerns. We have a lot to
celebrate, much for which we should be grateful. But we also carry heavy burdens, burdens that
we cannot lay aside but which at times seem more than we can carry. These burdens may have
to do with our financial security, our physical or psychological health. They may have to do with
problems in our marriages or with the burdens that members of our families carry. We have a lot
to celebrate in life. We also, most of us, carry a heavy cross.

This past week we mourned the passing and celebrated the life of Lee Cummings, one of
our beloved long-time members. And there was a lot to celebrate. Lee lived a long, joyful, and
faith-filled life. In so many ways his life was a gift. However, as we glance down the names of
the members and friends of our church family who are on our prayer list, especially the children
and young adults who are struggling with serious illness, we realize that we cannot take this life
we are given for granted. Because we never know how much time we have, we cannot take even
a single precious day for granted.

Try to think how Jesus must have felt on Palm Sunday. In the midst of the joyous
celebration, his followers laying palm branches on the road, the shadow of the cross fell over his
path. This is what the palm-cross symbolizes. It was a part of the life of Jesus, a powerful part
of the experience of Holy Week. It is also a part of our lives.

On Palm Sunday, when we sing the hymn “Ride On! Ride On in Majesty!” I find myself
getting choked up. I think of the mysterious nature of God’s pageant--that it is happy and sad, a
time of rejoicing and a time of mourning. I think how Jesus’ heart must have been heavy as he
rode into the city. The palm and the cross--the light and the shadow sides of life.

The hymn, which was written by Henry Milman in 1827, begins with a note of
celebration:

    Ride on! ride on in majesty!
    Hark! all the tribes hosanna cry;
    O Saviour meek, pursue Thy road
    With palms and scattered garments strowed.

Then the tone begins to change; the texture of the hymn begins to darken:
Ride on! ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
O Christ, Thy triumphs now begin
O’er captive death and conquered sin.

Ride on! ride on in majesty!
The winged squadrons of the sky
Look down with sad and wondering eyes
To see th’approaching sacrifice.

Ride on! ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain,
Then take, O God, Thy power and reign.

There are times when we, like Jesus, have our heads bowed by mortal pain. There are times when we, like Jesus, face the week that lies before us with a heavy heart. There are times when we, like Jesus, face the future feeling vulnerable and weak. There are times, like Jesus, when we wish God would take the bitter cup from us or from those who we suspect are burdened with more than they can carry.

But we have in our hands not only a cross but also a palm. Holy Week leads from the palm to the cup to the cross. But it doesn’t end with the cross. It ends with the empty tomb, with new life.

In the week to come, think about the palm-cross. Remember how deeply it symbolizes not only the events of Holy Week but also how deeply it symbolizes your week, how deeply it symbolizes not only Jesus’ life but also your life and the lives of those you love. Then step forth into the week, as Jesus did, knowing that amidst the joy and pain, the triumph and the tragedy, God is with us. We are not alone.

Step forward knowing that somehow, in ways that may perhaps be unknown to us, in the darkest moments of our lives the triumph to which Henry Milman witnesses will begin to burst forth. This belief, this faith, this conviction, is the glorious celebration of Easter.

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