

THE PARADOX OF PALM SUNDAY

(03/24/2024)

Scripture Lesson: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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 graces our altar--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, so we are pretty sure it happened, 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 alone 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. It was an expression of 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 spreading of palms on the road welcomed the entry of one whom the people believed was the Messiah for whom they longed, the one of the House of David who would unite the two kingdoms of 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 (or the kingdom of heaven) that was the focus of his preaching and his teaching, the kingdom to which he hoped to guide us when he called us to follow him, to become "disciples of the Way," was a spiritual, not a political kingdom.

Whatever their original significance might have been, 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 during the worship service. The ashes that are obtained from burning the leftover palms on Palm Sunday become the ashes that are distributed to parishioners on the following Ash Wednesday.

The palm cross that our previous music director, David Sickles, made for us many years ago, is deeply symbolic. It combines the palm-- symbol of honor, celebration, freedom, and triumph, with the cross--a symbol of sadness, humiliation, pain, defeat, and death. The opposites, the opposites in the life of Jesus and the opposites that we experience in our own lives, find expression in this powerful symbol.

As I mentioned, some churches celebrate Palm Sunday with a procession around the sanctuary during the worship service. Sometimes only the children process; sometimes the procession involves the entire congregation. Many years ago, when I was serving as the Protestant chaplain in a state mental hospital, the hospital worship service for patients and staff at 8:30 on Sunday mornings enabled our family to attend the worship service at the church in the town where we lived. However, it was my great misfortune my first Palm Sunday in our new church to discover that our pastor was a big fan of just such a procession! Immediately preceding the scripture reading, we were told to arise from our seats and process 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 to sit still, to sit quietly 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!" "Hosanna to the One who comes in the name of the Lord!" 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 and listen to the church organist, who was quite good--not as good as Michael and Jim, but good. However, Darlene insisted that participating in the parade was the right thing to do, and since no one else was refusing to participate, I would have been the only parishioner seated in the sanctuary as the procession circumambulated me.

Quite frankly, I don't remember the rest of the service. I suspect that when I reached the back of the sanctuary I quietly sneaked out through the back doors and went across the street for coffee. I also vowed that if I ever served a church again, I would not force introverted parishioners like me to participate in such a ritual!

Experiences like that during worship don't help me get in touch with my feelings. They pull me out of my feelings, and my feelings are an important part of my worship experience. They may work for other people, particularly extraverted feeling types, but they don't work for me! They remind me of what an Anglican colleague of mine calls "happy-clappy worship services." On Palm Sunday, I would rather sit quietly and be present to my feelings, partially because my feelings on that day in particular are mixed. There is a shadow hanging over the joyous celebration of Palm Sunday. This is 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 Mary's anointing of Jesus. Six days before 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 in Lazarus's house, in one of the most beautiful, one of the most meaningful acts of love, of ministry in the Bible, Mary takes a pound of costly perfume, anoints Jesus' feet with it, and then wipes his feet with her hair.

Judas, who was in charge of the purse, the funds that probably provided housing and meals for Jesus and the other disciples in their travels, 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 Judas to leave Mary alone, for Mary is anointing him for his death. He predicts that in little more than a week, Mary will bring the remainder of the ointment to his tomb to prepare his body for burial.

So, Holy 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, each reader extinguishes one candle, until finally our entire sanctuary 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 whom they hope will lead the rebellion against their Roman oppressors. However, if we look carefully, we can see that this joyous procession was already fraught with opposites. Instead of entering in a chariot, as would befit a warrior king, Jesus rides into Jerusalem seated on the back of a donkey. Instead of being surrounded by legions of soldiers, Jesus is accompanied by twelve ragamuffin 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 occur in Jesus; life; it is a profound truth about life. Jesus 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 the essence of paradox: holding the opposites, honoring the opposites, and allowing what Jung called the transcendent function to

emerge from the dialectic. Paradox is at the heart of Christian spirituality. This is why I like the symbolism of the palm cross that graces our altar every Palm Sunday.

The historical events of Holy Week, the historical events of Jesus' life, speak to us. The deeper truths of Holy Week are not simply historical truths; they are also eternal truths. They are 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? As the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us, we live in a world of opposites. There are moments of triumph, and there are moments of defeat. There are moments of joy, and there are moments of sadness. There are times of pleasure, and there are times when we are caught up in a physical or an emotional pain we cannot escape. There are times when we feel strong and on top of life, and there are 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 as a people of faith every Sunday morning, we raise up both celebrations and concerns. We certainly have a lot to celebrate, much for which we should be grateful! But we also carry heavy burdens, burdens that we cannot lay aside, burdens which at times seem more than we can carry. These burdens may have to do with our financial security, our physical health, our psychological health. They may have to do with conflicts within our marriages, within our relationships. They may have to do with the burdens that family members carry. To be sure, we have a lot to celebrate in life, a lot to celebrate in our lives! We also, many of us, carry a heavy cross.

When we read the names of the members and friends of our church family who are on our Prayer List, especially the names of children who are struggling with serious illness and are struggling to hold onto life, we realize that we cannot take this life, this precious life that we have been given by God for granted! Because we never know how much time we have on earth in this form, how much time we have to live this life and to share it with those we love, we cannot take even a single 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 falls 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. As you know, any time that I become choked up, any time that I find myself becoming teary during worship, I know that God is speaking to me. When I sing this hymn, I

think of the mysterious nature of God's pageant--that it is both happy and sad, that it is both a time of rejoicing and also a time of mourning. I suspect that Jesus' heart must have been heavy as he rode into the holy city of Jerusalem. The palm and the cross--the light and the shadow sides of his life, the light and the shadow sides of our lives as well.

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.*

Note how the hymn reminds us that Jesus is a meek savior. In the second verse, 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.*

In lowly pomp, ride on to die--a sacrificial death that will lead to triumph over both death and sin. Then the hymn rises to a greater, to a transcendent level, as the angels in heaven look down on what is happening to Jesus, the Christ become flesh:

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

And then the powerful resolution, our faith that when we bow our head to mortal pain, God will lead us from the valleys to the mountaintops, that God will lead us from sadness to joy, from darkness to light, from death to new life:

*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 whom we suspect are

burdened with more than they can carry. This is true of us as individuals. It is true of us as a nation. It is true of us as a world.

When we look up at our altar on Palm Sunday, we see a cross, but we also see a palm. Holy Week leads from the palm to the cup to the cross. But Holy Week doesn't end with the cross! It ends with the empty tomb, with new life! Next week, on Easter Sunday, the cross on our altar and also the chancel area of our sanctuary will be adorned with lilies, the symbol of spring, of resurrection, of new life! This is the message; this is the deep spiritual truth of Easter!

In the week to come, think about the palm cross. Remember how powerfully, how deeply it symbolizes not only the events of Holy Week, but also how it symbolizes the events of your week. Remember how powerfully, how deeply it symbolizes not only Jesus' life, but also how it symbolizes your life and the lives of those whom you love. Remember what the writer of Ecclesiastes said: there is a time for everything under heaven. Then step forth into the week, into your week, just as Jesus did, knowing that amidst the joy and pain, the triumph and the tragedy of life, God is with us! We are not alone!

Step forward into the week to come 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 message, the triumphant message of Easter!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
March 24, 2024*