

First the Bad News

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The Sixth Sunday in Lent  
Palm Sunday  
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“When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’”  
– Matthew 21:10

I suspect that some of you may be a bit put out with me this morning, because I’m not delivering on what you were expecting.

Most of us are old enough to remember Palm Sundays of another era, when they functioned more or less as dress rehearsals for Easter. There were, if not the mobs of Easter in the pews at least several more people than typically showed up on Sundays, and all the Sunday School children were enlisted, sometimes against their will, to participate in the Palm procession down the center aisle, waving their palms as the rest of us sang John Mason Neale’s translation of Bishop Theodulph’s hymn, “to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring.”

And we didn’t do that this morning firstly, because we don’t have enough children to dragoon into a procession, and, secondly, because I don’t want us to fall back into our old and unhelpful habit of unconsciously thinking that the sequence of the Christian story and thus the sequence of the Christian life is Palm Sunday followed immediately by Easter. By singing “All Glory, Laud, and Honor” we did do a bit of re-enacting of our ancestors’ welcome of Jesus into Jerusalem for the last time, but the mood I’d hoped for this morning was more majestic than festive, because we know what our ancestors did not, namely, that Jesus’ true triumph is not his entry into Jerusalem, but his entry into the lives of his followers on Easter morning, and that morning is not this morning.

The triumph of Jesus the Christ is not his deliverance of the Jewish people from the Romans; it’s his deliverance of all people from the powers of sin and death. And that triumph is not achieved by his riding the donkey directly into heaven. That triumph comes at a tremendous price, namely, his suffering and death, and that’s the bad news that I do not wish us to gloss over on Palm Sunday. The good news of Easter always starts from the context of the bad news of the mess we have made of our lives and of God’s world, and an honest celebration of Easter requires first an honest confrontation with ourselves.

And that’s why you’ll see, on the front of this morning’s bulletin, that this Sunday is designated the Sixth Sunday in Lent before it’s designated Palm Sunday. We are still in the season of Lent and we will be until next Sunday morning, and let me remind you that the season of Lent is, above all else, the season of reflection, when we slow down, step away from

our screens, and reflect on our lives in the light of the gospel, which is the story of lives set free and made whole by the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

We think of those restored lives as Jairus' daughter or the Gerasene demoniac or the paralytic let down through the roof by his friends. But those lives are really placeholders for our lives; the characters in the gospel stories are our stand-ins, and we are meant to read their stories as our stories. In the words of the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer, we are meant to fuse the horizon of our lives with the horizon of their lives – where their lives leave off the story, our lives are meant to take it up – and that's the only way to read the Bible as faithful people.

Every one of us, for example, suffers from blindness in one way or another, to one degree or another, and not just metaphorically. Those people whose eyesight doesn't function suffer from one kind of blindness, but those people who cannot see the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the discriminated against, the abused, and the neglected – their eyesight, physical and spiritual, is defective. That's a kind of blindness both literal and metaphorical, and we believe that Jesus can heal that kind of blindness just as he healed the man born blind in John's gospel about whom we read a couple of weeks ago.

We are all paralyzed in one way or another, to one degree or another, about one thing or another. Some parts of ourselves we simply cannot get to work on our own. We cannot bring ourselves to write those letters for Bread for the World or supporting clean water and air and soil. We cannot rouse ourselves to gather in Public Square to protest racism, militarism and bigotry. We cannot stand up to the powers that be on behalf of the powerless and voiceless. We are paralyzed with fear – fear of looking foolish, fear of repercussions, fear of disapproval from loved ones or acquaintances, fear of making a mistake, fear of making nuisances of ourselves. And so we do nothing – we are paralyzed, in other words.

And I could continue down the list of what Yale chaplain John Vannorsdall used to call “our failures of love and courage” and what the Prayer Book calls “the things we have done and the things we have left undone” that separate us from the love of God, the love of creation, the love of others, and the love of ourselves. To read the stories of Jesus faithfully is to read them, as the word itself says, full of faith – that if Jesus can heal one kind of blindness, he can heal your kind of blindness. If Jesus can restore movement to one kind of paralytic, he can heal your spiritual paralysis that is evident in your physical inertia. If Jesus can provide for multitudes with very little, he can provide you with a very great deal indeed.

And all you have to do is accept those gifts he is waiting to give you and incarnate your acceptance – show by how you live that you have accepted them, not simply with your mind or with your lips, but with your life. Christianity is an all-or-nothing game; you don't keep a few chips on the table waiting for a better hand. Jesus the Christ offers you the best hand you're ever going to be dealt, in this world or in the world to come, so you'd better get in the game.

And you do that, first, by confronting honestly and courageously the bad news of the world that makes the good news of the gospel both necessary and indispensable, and that is our task this morning. We are part of the world and part of the world's problems, while we are also, we hope, pray, and believe, part of God's solution for those problems. What distinguishes progressive Christianity from many other versions of the Christian faith is our unwillingness to let go of either end of that thread of reality that says there is bad news as well as good news and they both belong to us.

We don't, as some Christians do, wallow in misery, shame, and self-abnegation. We don't see ourselves, to use Jonathan Edwards' famous image, as "a spider or some loathsome insect" in the hands of an angry God. We affirm the psalmist's language in Psalm 8 that asks, "What are human beings, that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor." Being crowned with glory and honor is nothing to be despised. We progressive Christians take the incarnation seriously, which means that God neither creates junk nor takes the form of junk in taking on our human nature. As Ethel Waters put it rather pungently, "God made me, honey, and God don't make no junk."

And yet, on the other hand – and this is the much greater danger for us progressive Christians – we don't slide easily and smoothly into the soft cultural feather bed of unqualified acceptance, that says "I'm okay, you're okay, we're all okay, and it's all okay." It most certainly is not. The world is not okay. I'm not, you're not, we're not, and it's not.

The heritage of social justice that we have received from our forebears in faith will not let us rest at ease in Zion. If we peek outside our comfortably segregated lives – segregated in our context at least as much by class as by race, the classes to which we in America steadfastly refuse to admit – we'll see pretty quickly that the world is a mess. It's a mess near at hand, and it's a mess far away. It's broken and we broke much of it, it's hurting and we're causing much of that pain, and it's suffering, and we're both inflicting and enduring a great deal of that misery.

And because I know that some of you will not be with us here in church on Maundy Thursday, when we will hear again Jesus' passion, or on Good Friday, when we will retrace Jesus' steps to his cross and burial, Palm Sunday is one of the last opportunities Lent affords us to confront that dual reality of being part of both the problem and the solution honestly, courageously, and with as much of God's grace as we can open ourselves up to.

It may very well have been the case, on that first Palm Sunday, that the crowd crying out "Hosanna!" contained the same elements as the crowd that would later cry on Good Friday, "Crucify him!" Not an identical crowd, perhaps, but almost certainly a crowd with some overlap. And it is our conceit, as I preached last week, and the conceit of every generation of Christian believers, to imagine ourselves firmly in the camp of those who cried only hosanna.

That's not the way it works, friends. That's not the way the world works now, worked then, or ever will work. None of us has the clean heart and right spirit for which the psalmist prays in Psalm 51; mostly clean and mostly right, perhaps, in our best moments, but in the world in which we must live our compromised lives, none of us has bragging rights when it comes to righteousness.

"All our righteousness," Isaiah says in chapter 64, "is as filthy rags," and he says that not to those rogues and scalawags over there, but to those who considered themselves then and consider themselves now to be the people of God.

It is our righteousness and not their unrighteousness to which we must devote our greatest attention and concern, and against which we must constantly be on our guard, for it is self-righteousness, as individuals and as groups, that blinds us most thoroughly and dangerously.

It is the person and the group who can never admit their own sins, who can never admit to being wrong, who can never back down, who can never apologize and attempt to make amends who pose by far the greatest threat to themselves and to others.

And that's why the city of Jerusalem was in such turmoil when Jesus came to town, as Matthew reports in the tenth verse of his twenty-first chapter, which I have taken as my text: "When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'"

We don't like to think of Jesus throwing a city into turmoil, but that's what he did. By the time he entered Jerusalem for the last time, he had built up sufficient following from among the religious radicals and sufficient resistance from the religious conservatives that the whole city was in turmoil because of him. The usual restiveness among the Jews during Passover reached a new pitch during Jesus' visit, because his Jewish followers believed that he was going to deliver them from the Romans just as Moses had delivered their ancestors from Pharaoh. For many Jews, Jesus was the new Moses, the great deliverer, and Passover was going to be his moment of triumph. Thus the palms.

And yet, for other Jews – devout Jews, learned Jews, politically engaged and socially responsible Jews – Jesus was a huge troublemaker and rabble-rouser, whose talk of deliverance was making things worse rather than better. These Jews, whom we think of as Jesus' opponents, were doing their best to keep their own religious tradition intact and their own people from either imploding in on themselves or making themselves so odious to the Romans that they would bring destruction upon themselves from without.

And by Palm Sunday, everyone had dug into their positions and were firmly entrenched in their own convictions. Jesus' followers thought that this was it, when he was finally going to take charge of the armed popular uprising for which his disciples had been hoping, and Jesus' opponents thought that this was going to be the spark that would set the whole tinderbox of Passover in Jerusalem ablaze. Everyone was anxious and everyone thought the stakes were high if not of ultimate significance.

And both parties were right and both parties were wrong, just as both parties always are, in every dispute and in varying degrees. Jesus got his uprising, but it was a church and not an army. And in about forty years, the Romans would destroy Jerusalem, but that would not be the end of Judaism by any means. So everybody was right, in a way, and everybody was wrong, and we're still living with that mix today.

Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem did not triumph over that chaotic mix, but it did triumph over the belief that chaos is all there is. As Christians we do not believe that. There is clarity, there is light, there is a difference between right and wrong, there is a way forward, and above all else, there is hope, hope that just as God's spirit brought creation from the primordial chaos, so will God's spirit bring forth a new creation from the perennial chaos. As Christians we are not immune to misplaced hope or false hope, but we stake our claim and order our lives around Easter hope, about which I will have a great deal more to say next Sunday.

But for today, our task is to face the world and our faith fairly and squarely, knowing that this important chapter in Jesus' story and in our story – the clash of the call to repentance with the resistance of entrenched power and fear – is not the last chapter. That chapter remains to be written, for him and for us.