

Palm Sunday (2024)

Palm Sunday takes us on an emotional rollercoaster ride.

First there is the waving of palms and shouts of something that equals “God save the King!”

The spirit is celebratory. At last Jesus, openly reveals Himself as Israel’s Messiah . . . not with words but by acting out a prophecy found in Zechariah. He comes into Jerusalem meek and roading on a donkey.

The people get it, and WE join them as we stand and sing:

All glory, laud, and honour
To Thee, Redeemer, King!
To Whom the lips of children
Made sweet Hosannas ring.

But then the mood quickly changes as the Passion according to St. Matthew is read. The rollercoaster which had been soaring upward takes a precipitous plunge downward.

Instead of hearing shouts of Hosanna, we hear cries of “Crucify Him, Crucify Him.” Palm Sunday is also the Sunday of the Passion.

Up then down. Triumphant followed by seeming defeat. Acclamation by rejection. That is the way Palm Sunday goes liturgically.

After the Passion narrative is read, it would be tempting for the preacher to sit down and say nothing and for members of the congregation to file out in silence.

And indeed that is what happened in 2004 when a group from St. Luke’s went down to Canton to view Mel Gibson’s newly released epic film *The Passion of Christ*.

When the movie was over, people, almost in a state of shock, left the theatre without so much as a whisper. Absent was the usual clatter and chatter.

When asked about the blood and brutality in the film, the Pope at the time could only answer “It was as it was.”

The message got through. The cost of our rescue was as tremendous as the love that brought it down.

Love that knows no limits. That is what we see displayed on the cross, and that is the thought we should take with us as we head into Holy Week.

We live in a world of false loves and false protestations of love. Jesus shows us what true love looks like.

A practical application here is that the same costly, active love seen on the cross should be seen in the Christian fellowship.

If people outside the church saw more love within, there would be more Christians. Wasn't it Gandhi who said: "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians."

So let our love be real. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."

But there is something else we might want to focus on as well this morning, and that is our common need. We discover this common need as we look at the cast of characters around the cross.

They represent different kinds of people but people not that different from those with whom we rub shoulders every day, indeed, people not that different from ourselves.

One commentator, J. Paterson Symth, said that the world in miniature can be seen around the cross on Good Friday, and so it can.

Let's look at three from this cast of characters.

First there were the **chief priests**. Two are named: Caiaphas, the official high priest, and Annas, the ex-high priest who continued to have great influence over his successor and the affairs of the Jewish council – the Sanhedrin.

These were men of wealth, culture, education and yes religion, but they were not good men.

They appear a number of times in today's passage, always in an unfavorable light.

They instigated Jesus' arrest.

They handed Jesus over to Pilot to be put to death.

They persuaded the crowd to cry out for Barabbas, rather than Jesus.

So great their rage, they put up false witnesses to testify against Jesus. They were without a moral compass.

Perpetuating their positions of power and status – not truth -- was their chief concern.

They remind us religion is not enough.

People who use religion for their own advantage, sad to say, are still out there and playing their game. So, pay attention and watch whom you follow.

But it is not just *they* we need to watch out for. We also need to pay attention to our own hearts. What are our motives?

Is our religion genuine? Are we lovers of truth and justice, followers of the Lamb?

Stay close to God, and God will stay close to you. Let the mind that was in Christ Jesus be in you. ///

Then there was **Judas Iscariot**, the member of the Twelve that betrayed Jesus.

Here we find a man who enjoyed great spiritual privilege. He heard Jesus teach firsthand. He saw His miracles. He tasted His wine.

Yet, he became a pawn of the devil. He sold out for money.

He stands as a striking illustration of the principle put forth in 1 Timothy 6:10: **“For the love of money is the root of all evil [all kinds of bad things].”**

People like Judas are still with us today. They put things before people, money before God. The lure of material security causes them to cut moral corners, to sell out to the devil.

The temptation to do this, moreover, is not just out there in other people. It with ourselves.

Again, we need to be on guard. Material things are gifts from a good God.

They add pleasure to life when rightly received and used, but when wrongly received and used, they lead to destruction.

The latter was the way it was with Judas. A few coins brought him not happiness, but a suicide's grave. Learn from Judas. ///

Pontius Pilot was likewise part of the cast of characters that day. He stands as a pathetic picture of weakness and cowardice.

He knew Jesus was innocent, yet he refused to do the right thing. He set aside honor for expediency. He sought to absolve himself of responsibility by ceremonially washing his hands.

The temptation to compromise, to go with the crowd, to play it safe, to pass the buck, remains with us today.

Pilot, by negative example, teaches us to do the right thing even when it is unpopular and costly. ///

The three characters at whom we have looked are not that different from people we know, indeed from ourselves. A question that follows on is: **Who sent Jesus to the cross?**

The Jewish religious leaders, Judas, the Romans, Pilot, the crowd that called for Barabas' release and for Jesus to be crucified?

All had a part in His death. More than that, they don't stand alone. They represent all of humanity, ourselves included.

I nailed him to the tree. I crucified him. I am the guilty.

I mentioned earlier Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of Christ*.

Some criticized the film for laying the blame of Jesus' death on the Jews. That, in fact, is not what Gibson does.

In the scene where the nails are driven into Jesus' hands, it his hands that are seen hammering the spikes.

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This was intended to signify what we have already seen: We all had a part in this horrendous act. There is enough blame to go around.

The good news is that the redemption and forgiveness brought by the cross is likewise for all. It meets what I called earlier, our **common need**.

We shall probably never fully understand the mechanics of the Christian doctrine of the Atonement. Hymn writer Harry W. Farrington perhaps said it best:

I know not how that Calvary's cross
a world from sin could free;
I only know its matchless love
has brought God's love to me.

Which is to say: We were all a mess and had lost our way, and Jesus did what was necessary to take us by the hand and lead us back to God.

As a result, we can have a new start. We don't have to be defined or held back by our past.

Think about your own past, your own mistakes, your own failures. Lay them at the cross and leave them there.

The love that knows no limits has intersected with our common need.

The Passion of Christ tells us as much. Believe it, live it, tell it out!