

Palm/Passion Sunday – April 13, 2025

Meditation on “The Palms”:

The Palm Sunday Scripture readings put together the “palm” and the “passion” Gospel passages – this year, from the Gospel of Luke. Now – it’s not easy to pair the story of a celebratory parade with the story of a trial and the execution that follows. That’s a lot of theological and emotional ground to cover! If this service seems crowded and contradictory even, there is a historical reason for it. The procession of palms is a story handed down to us from the Christian church in Jerusalem, which has reenacted Jesus’s entry into the city with a full parade since at least the fourth century. The emphasis on the extended passion story on this Sunday comes from the Christian church in Rome. The two traditions were cross-pollinated, if you will, and merged over the fourth to eighth centuries.

The reality on which it’s based is that the same crowds that praised Jesus on his entry into Jerusalem are the same crowds that only days later began lobbying angrily for his execution. With palm branches of hope still in their hands, it seems, they give up on their vision of a Messiah, which Jesus does not, for them, fulfill. The mob mentality rules the day, and when pressed by Pilate, they settle for the freeing of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus. And in this story, we are reminded that we (big “we”) are not so different from them: we who praise and strive to follow Jesus also, at times, betray, abandon, or merely (merely??) ignore Christ when it’s more convenient, more comfortable, or perhaps less confusing for us to do so.

Again I say, “If this service seems crowded and contradictory, there is a good reason.” Going from the “high” of Palm Sunday straight to the “high” of Easter, without pausing to consider the passion story, is to cheat and more importantly, be cheated. When we read and hear the passion story, we become not just innocent bystanders. We are implicated in the story. We are the crowd along the streets in Jerusalem shouting, “Hosanna! Hosanna!” And we are the same mob on Good Friday screaming, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” As Episcopal priest and preacher Fleming Rutledge has noted, “the liturgy of Palm Sunday is set up to show you how you can say one thing one minute and its opposite the next. This is the nature of the sinful human being.” Yes, the story of the palms and then the story of the passion put us in the thick of things, where we play many different parts. In them, we see our human failings and our honest strivings. We know ourselves to be both guilty and forgiven. The journey through it all is the thing. And Easter does break forth. But not yet...

Meditation on “The Passion”:

In these days leading up to Holy Week, Christian pastors everywhere are considering the many ways there are to tell the story of what happened on Good Friday. The Gospel writers offer different ways to tell it. According to John, in his Gospel, it involved a collusion between religion and politics. Pilate and the chief priests conspired to solve their mutual “Jesus” problem while managing to remain enemies. According to Luke’s version, which we just heard, Pilate and Herod do everything within their power to turn the “Jesus” problem over to the religious leaders, from whom it came. In all of the Gospels, Jesus stands at the center of the stage like a mirror in which all those around him see themselves clearly for who they are, sooner or later. One way Christians have avoided seeing our own reflections in the mirror of Jesus is to pretend that this is a story about Romans and Jews. It’s not. Children of God are killed in every generation, in every governmental regime. They have been and continue to be killed in holy wars, concentration camps, prison cells, political insurrections, wars waged over who feels entitled to what land, acts of international and domestic terrorism. The charges against those killed have run the gamut, but treason, blasphemy, being somehow “different” from the desired norm have headed the list, just as they did for Jesus. He upset those in charge at the courthouse and in the temple. He suggested they were not doing their jobs. He offered himself as a mirror in which they could see themselves, and they were so appalled by what he was showing them that they smashed the mirror.

Luke’s account of the Passion of Christ gives us ample ways in which we can put ourselves into the story, see ourselves in the mirror Christ holds up to us. There’s Judas, in his betrayal. There’s Peter, in his denial. There are the accusers, the scoffers, and the mockers. There’s Simon of Cyrene, carrying a cross he never asked to carry, nor ever knew why he was commanded to do it. There’s the centurion whose eyes were opened too late, it seems. There’s the criminal absolved of sin at the last minute – not too late, but barely so. The purpose of sharing this Passion story together is not to be beat up by it. I do not intend to beat you up, nor do I intend to beat myself up – although life in this world certainly provides us ample implements with which to do that. The purpose of sharing this Passion story together is to be reminded that, even in the times that life in this world feels hellish, the worst thing is never the last thing. The last and best thing is the eternal promise found in the words of Jesus to the criminal on the cross beside him – “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”