

Palm Sunday

Year A

Strengthened to Reach Forth our Hands in Love

[RCL] The Liturgy of the Palms

- **Matthew 21:1-11**
- **Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29**

The Liturgy of the Word

- **Isaiah 50:4-9a**
- **Philippians 2:5-11**
- **Matthew 26:14- 27:66 or Matthew 27:11-54**
- **Psalm 31:9-16**

Today we take part in the Gospel story more than on other Sundays. While, there never is an audience in a worship service, that distinction is made clear on Palm Sunday. It may seem that there is no distinction between a congregation and an audience, but there is a vast difference. An audience gathers to watch a performance. A congregation is a group gathered for worship. Some of us have roles as readers, acolytes and even as preacher, but all of us are active participants.

On Palm Sunday, churches raise the congregations' participation level. We begin this service reading of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We proclaim "Hosanna in the highest." Then we take up palm branches and sing and process our way into church. The congregation plays the role of the crowd that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. That was the easy part. But Palm Sunday is also known as Passion Sunday, for on this day we recount the story of Jesus' suffering and death. And the crowd that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem also took part in the betrayal, which followed that Friday.

Each week the congregation takes part in the worship. This happens in your hearts, and also in the words of the liturgy. Easy words usually. Words like, "Our Father who art in heaven" and "Thanks be to God." Today, the liturgy puts some very different words in your mouth:

"Let him be crucified."

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And the most daunting of all, "His blood be on us and on our children."

Harsh words. Painful words. Words that seem to tempt God to take us seriously in a way we don't want God to act.

On that Friday we now call Good, Jesus' betrayal was complete. He had been deserted by his disciples and rejected by the Jewish leadership, as well as the crowd that had welcomed him so enthusiastically with palm branches and cloaks spread on the road. Mocked, beaten and finally crucified by the Roman officials, the man we call the King of Peace was put to death as a threat to the peace of Jerusalem. In

starkest contrast to his welcome into the city gates, Jesus was taken outside of the city to be killed. Like all criminals, they did not want his death to desecrate the city. Jesus' cross stood by the road leading into town as a warning to any other trouble makers not to follow in his footsteps.

Darkness covered the whole land from noon to three. Then Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani? My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" In his humanity, Jesus' betrayal was complete. In these words from the cross, we see how far the love of God extends. God the son loved us so much, that he would not give up on that love even when the cost was death on a cross. At Easter, the love of God is confirmed further, but on this day, we wait in an in between time in our readings, after his death and before the Good News that would follow.

Yet, our worship continues. It is traditional that there is no public confession of sins on Palm Sunday, because we already confront our sins so fully in the service itself. Instead of a confession and absolution, we read the words,

Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles, "Peace I give to you; my own peace I leave with you." Regard not our sins, but the faith of your Church, and give to us the peace and unity of that heavenly City, where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, now and for ever.

Then during the Great Thanksgiving, which is the second part of our communion service, the celebrant says,

For our sins he was lifted high upon the cross, that he might draw the whole world to himself; and, by his suffering and death, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who put their trust in him.

And we continue not merely with words, but there are more actions as well. For even after we remember Jesus' passion, especially after we remember Jesus' passion, we are invited back to the table once again for bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

There are the words, "Take, eat" and "Drink this, all of you." These words of invitation to get out of your seats and come partake of Christ's very real presence as we remember his suffering and death. The story loops back from the passion to the table of The Last Supper with an invitation to join Jesus once again. We are given a chance once more to join our voices to that of the Centurion who proclaimed, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Like the crowd that Holy Week, we can go from singing God's praises to denying his presence and his power, and we can do it in much less time. The words and actions of this Sunday show something of our words and actions throughout our lives.

In subtle ways, we betray the faith that is in us. We deny Jesus by not speaking or acting when we are given an opportunity to say or do the right thing. Sometimes we deny him by saying and doing things that deny the Christ in us.

For while judgment and hate would have put Jesus' to death, neither judgment nor hate get the last word in this liturgy as in our lives.

Jesus stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might coming within the reach of his saving embrace and those of us who have enjoyed Christ's presence in Word and Sacrament leave our worship this day strengthened to reach forth our hands in love.

May God empower us to bring others into the knowledge and love of Jesus.

Amen.

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