

## Sermon for Palm Sunday Year C

[RCL] Psalm 31:9-16 Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56 or 23:1-49

In many Christian communities, today's worship begins with a procession around the church grounds and perhaps the neighborhood as well – an appealing way to witness to the faith this Sunday before Easter, to be sure. The event may even garner coverage on the evening news or in the local paper. Still, no matter how sincere, procession, pageantry, and palm waving are in their way undemanding gestures, especially when nearly everyone at church is engaged in them. But there is of course no long-term commitment involved in such street theater. Just ask the people of Jerusalem.

Palm Sunday is all about involvement and commitment – and the difference between the two. Those who followed Jesus on the final leg of his journey into Jerusalem singing his praises were surely involved and caught up in the excitement of the moment. They were clearly aware of Jesus and his ministry. They no doubt liked him and the Gospel message of peace and reconciliation. And, they probably thought to themselves that here at last was a great prophet – one whom God had raised up – and one with a bright future in the faith-based power politics of the day.

And, to prove their interest and involvement, they lent Jesus their presence and their voices this special day. According to the Gospel of Luke – as we heard moments ago at the Blessing of Palms – one of them presumably even lent him a colt to ride on as he came down into the Holy City “from the Mount of Olives.” Echoing the words of the heavenly host at Jesus' birth, they all proclaimed, “Glory in the highest heaven,” and spread their cloaks before him. They were involved.

But like all of us here today they likely also had their responsibilities and preoccupations. What might have been a fun outing one day, welcoming the latest prophet into town led quickly enough to the duties and errands of the next day and beyond. After all, there were mouths to feed and bills to pay. There was work to be done. By the time Good Friday had rolled around, no one was left to lay down branches or cloaks for Jesus, much less chant hosanna before him. All, including his disciples, had abandoned him. Jesus was on his own. Our own joyous hosannas this day are themselves soon enough muffled by the flat and sober recitation of the Passion narrative of Luke and the story of Jesus betrayal and death. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord,” turns with a start to, “Crucify, crucify him.” It is easy to be involved even today. Commitment alas is still something else entirely. Just ask Jesus.

From some of the earliest stories of Genesis to the later writings of the prophets, God on the other hand is always found to be firmly committed to God's people, Israel. In our first reading from the Hebrew scriptures for instance, the Prophet Isaiah proclaims, “It is the Lord God who helps me. “Isaiah knows instinctively that God is always more ready to show mercy and lend assistance than we are to accept it. No matter the faults of the people – no matter how much they become sidetracked and preoccupied with mundane or even trivial concerns – the Lord's Covenant, God's commitment, remains unwavering. And, when the Psalmist laments, “I am in trouble,” and “forgotten like a dead man,” they can still console themselves by turning to the Divine. “You are my God,” they declare without equivocation. “My times are in your hand.” Indeed, as we ourselves know, it is sometimes when we feel the most forsaken

and abandoned that the Lord is closest of all. The emptiness of our hearts at such moments makes room finally for the presence of the One who will tolerate no competition from our myriad diversions and distractions.

Nor of course does Our Lord waver in commitment to us – and to all humankind. That is the message of Jesus' Passion and death. Like the people of ancient Israel, we may be fickle or even erratic in our life of faith but Jesus never once fails us or lets us down. As Paul explains it in our reading today from his Letter to the Philippians, Christ “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself... and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” There can be no greater commitment than that.

So, Palm Sunday takes us on a liturgical and emotional roller-coaster ride like no other day of the church year. The involvement of the crowds at Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem challenges us once again to reflect on the commitment that led Jesus to give his life for our redemption. Amid the many “changes and chances of this mortal life” this or any week we dare not forget the Cross.

It would be easy enough for any of us to come to church on Palm Sunday, to “let sweet hosannas ring,” to gather a palm frond or two, head home, and not return until Easter Day. What a fine religion we have, we might be tempted to think: Palm branches and hosannas one Sunday, Easter lilies and alleluias the next. But if we did not pay attention to the Passion Gospel and the story of Jesus' death we would have missed an essential piece – perhaps *the* essential piece. We would have missed the commitment and covenant that the whole story is about. We would have missed Good Friday.

Jesus enters the Holy City of Jerusalem on a colt provided for the purpose by a stranger. Like the throngs surrounding him that happy day, perhaps he too was caught up and engaged in the moment and the spectacle. But days later, as we know only too well, he leaves the City for the last time not on a colt, much less a royal sedan, but on foot and carrying a cross, given over to the enormous task of winning our redemption one painful step at a time.

No matter where our life journey and its twists and turns may take us, as followers of Christ our voyage of faith leads most assuredly through Jerusalem and on to Calvary with our Lord. Like good pilgrims the world over and like Jesus himself, we too must walk the way of the cross. There is no other route home. For, only at the cross does our Lord at last turn our feeble involvement into the commitment and Covenant of Calvary and the assurance of our salvation.

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