

By: The Rev. Helen O. Harper
Priest-in-Charge
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
Niagara Falls, NY

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Palm Sunday – Why Do We Remember?

I remember, while attending St. Ambrose Roman Catholic church and school in Brooklyn, New York, how much I looked forward to the Palm Sunday procession. This procession, which was carefully choreographed months in advance, consisted of incense, crosses, several priests, and nuns, all the altar boys, a choir singing hymns in Latin, followed by several hundred parishioners carrying palm branches walking 1 square block around the church. But as much as I enjoyed the excitement and pageantry of this part of the liturgy, I pretty much dreaded what was coming next...the reading of the Passion Narrative, the story of the last days of Jesus Christ. Over the years I was foolish enough to devise what I thought was a clever way to “handle” hearing the content of the Passion Narrative. I convinced myself this reading would have less impact if I was simply prepared myself for what I was going to hear. Now understand...this plan has never worked because I never been ready for the emotional and spiritual impact of the account of the last days of Jesus. There is always an underlying sense of foreboding attached to this day which tempers all the joyful words and songs we first sing. The mood changes quickly after the sweet hosannas stop ringing in our ears, sort of like the strange sense of calm we often feel before a big storm.

We find this day, Palm Sunday, is bittersweet because unlike the participants who came out to see Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, we know how the story ends. Every year we listen to the descriptions of the suffering and death of Jesus which all too soon casts a pall over our initial festive feelings and displays. So...what is left to be said after we hear an account of Jesus' arrest, torture, trial, and death? Our words seem almost anti climatic and even somewhat intrusive! We experience a roller coaster of emotions when we hear the story so...why remember? Why remember and reenact the mass gathering of the many pilgrims in Jerusalem who had come out that day, and in a time-honored act of welcome to royalty laid their robes on the ground. They also tore branches from the trees and began waiving them around, all in preparation for the man, at this point, considered a king. This crowd had hoped to come out and see a warrior riding on horseback, but what they saw that day was a man - much like any other man riding a little donkey. Should this really had been considered a triumphal entry? Some historical accounts describe that first Palm Sunday as a carefully crafted political demonstration, an attempt by Jesus to put a stop to the corrupt dealings in the Temple, with their practices of money changing and other commercial activities that should not have been taking place within those sacred spaces. Perhaps this was a political move to try to elicit an indictment of the perpetrators.

The priests, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Scribes were all there too, on that day, watching Jesus as they had always had done, looking for a chance to make their move to put an end to Jesus whom they considered a troublemaker. The sight of these festivities sent them into a frenzy. Mark in Chapter 3: verse 6 says “*The Pharisees went out and (they) immediately, conspired with the Herodians against (Jesus), and (they) planned how to destroy him.*”

As we listen closely to the events of this day and the coming week called Holy Week, we have questions: How could people have been so cruel against one who taught, fed, comforted the people, healed them, and raised their dead to life? Why did the disciples and Jesus' faithful followers abandon Jesus when he needed them most? We cringe at the hypocrisy of the high priests, and we are repelled by the fickle words and ironic actions of the crowd who first expressed joy and welcome with their "*Hosanna's*" then, within a very short time, betrayed Jesus with their bloodthirsty calls of "*Crucify him, Crucify Him.*"

The story of the last days of Jesus' life represents a turning point in salvation history, a turning point for us spiritually. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew shows us a Jesus, a man on the move healing, teaching, traveling here and there, exorcising demons, and feeding the multitudes. But beginning with today's liturgy we see a man who actually refuses to use his divine power to save himself from that which is to come. We see a man who refuses to abandon his trust in God. Jesus refused to set aside that which God asked of him, to be betrayed, tortured, crucifixion and then to die. His accusers, those who stood below his cross, and those who mocked him: the chief priests, the scribes, even those who were crucified next to him found it impossible to believe he did not want to use whatever power and influence he had save himself! Some even cried out to him saying: "*Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.*" But Jesus refused to fight back against the shame poured upon him by that mighty, flashy display of Rome's imperial power called crucifixion. Jesus did not use his power to save himself to avoid his inevitable death. Rather Jesus used his death to defeat death, our death. The Gospels makes it clear that Jesus' life was not taken from him. The Gospels tell us those who arrested, beat, tried, and crucified Jesus did not take his life, rather Jesus willingly gave up his life. Scripture tells us: "*For the Son of Man came [to us]...to give up his life...[as]...a ransom for...[us the]...many.*" **(Mark 10:45, Matthew 20:28)**

As we begin this week called Holy, we also begin remembering and re-enacting the various events of the last days and hours of Jesus. Whatever we do seems suspended in time, moments when over and over again we feel the shock, and experience the horror of human nature raw, exposed, and we cannot help but see ourselves within these stories. Once again we are astounded by what we hear and we even secretly wonder if *We* had been there how would *We* have participated, what would have been *OUR* role? It was the right thing to shout praises and wave palm at the parade, everyone was singing, everyone was shouting no one's voice stood out during the merriment. But it would not have been safe to speak out on behalf of Jesus at his trial. It would have been too risky, too life threatening. It was better to keep silent. During this week we might catch a glimpse of ourselves standing in the thick of the crowd or on the sidelines in the shadows, allowing this heinous process to unfold realizing then, as now, it is dangerous to speak the truth in public.

This week appropriately called "*Holy*," begins with Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday once again begins countdown time in salvation history. The events of this week slowly unfold, stretch out before us and lead us directly to the cross. This week is a time when everything we hear, everything we read, everything we sing and everything we dare to reenact makes us uncomfortable and pushes the limits of our human emotion. This day makes us edgy and uncomfortable and we will leave our churches and sacred spaces with a sense of uncertainty. So why remember?

What I know about humanity is this. As Christian people we turn to our liturgies during our times of joy, sorrow, uncertainty, and transition. And we use our liturgies to call to mind and commemorate the historical occurrences of our salvation history, and also to learn about God's divine revelation. Through liturgy we gain knowledge and valuable insight into our lives, and we

remember “...that God called Israel to be the people of God, and the Word of God was spoken through the prophets, and that the revelation of the Word of God...Jesus Christ came to us in human form.” Every week through liturgy we hear the greatest of all requests for remembrance made by Jesus himself at his last Passover celebration, his Last Supper with his disciples. It was Jesus’ last will and testament when he asked us to continue to remember him and the events of his life by joining together, breaking and eating bread and sharing a cup of wine together.

My suggestion is that we continue to move through Holy Week the way we moved through all of Lent, with our practices of self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial, and with an intense focus on Holy Scripture. Holy Week has begun and if we follow closely we will see the crowd decide in a few short days that there is nothing that Jesus has said or done during his lifetime that they want to believe is true. The disciples will scatter separating themselves from Jesus to save their lives. Judas will betray his beloved leader, and the religious establishment and the status quo will move with all haste to put an innocent man to death.

As for us...we remember. We remember the contradictions and confusion of long ago while firmly believing, through faith that our failures and mistakes will be completely turned around, our sins will be forgiven, our selfishness and thoughtlessness toward each other, our flagrant use of resources in the world, will be forgiven and transformed through the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the end the Passion Narrative is not scripture that we should, or even can, expect to “handle” easily, as I thought I could all those years ago back in Brooklyn. It is certainly scripture that we cannot ignore simply because it raises difficult truths about ourselves. The Passion Narrative is sacred drama which is to be experienced, explored, and entered into again and again, by we who dare to live our lives by events that have come to mean so much to us.

I will close with the words of Andrew of Crete, 6th Century, Bishop, theologian, homilist, and hymn writer. This is from his oration on Palm Sunday where he says:

“Let us go together today to meet Christ, let us run to accompany him as he moves toward his holy and blessed passion, and imitate those who met him...(but) not by covering his path with garments, olive branches or palm,...We -who have been baptized into Christ - must ourselves be the garments that we spread before him. Let our souls take the place of the welcoming branches. By doing this we will be able to receive Christ at his coming, and God, whom no limits can contain, will be within us.”

Today may God continue to be with us and within us. Amen.

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