

Palm Sunday 2022

If in the ancient world, all roads led to Rome, all our roads lead to Jerusalem. It is because in our own Jerusalem, there is no pre-packaged order by which things happen; the logic of suffering for most of us is all internal. We do not get to stand outside the order which surrounds us, ridden as it often is by betrayals, trickery, and self-serving motives. However much we want to stand today outside the proceedings of a mock trial, abandonment by friends and a painful death, we are penetrated by the understanding that this is something through which all we live, that the distance between our “Hosanna” and shouts to “Crucify him” is small indeed. If we know our own Golgothas, we have watched others endure theirs, those who are suffering simply because there needs to be order and there are plenty around who are willing to provide it; our history is replete with those whose thirst for order is far greater than their appetite for justice and mercy. If the last century-or-so had been any guide, we believe in order, peace on our own terms, more than any suggestion that mercy or justice has any purchase on our souls.

Surely this man was innocent. The observation by the centurion is the filter through which we see and hear all that happens this morning. In Mark’s gospel, he tells us that this crucified man is God’s son, an idea that bookends the whole of the gospel. Luke’s Jesus is treated far more ironically. At the beginning of his gospel, Jesus lays out the marks of his own mission, that he has come to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and the year of the Lord’s favor. The irony of his condemnation in the face of these proclamations remains the central feature of his death, even as he asks the father to forgive them because they do not know what they are doing. Such is the mercy of a God who is shown none for himself.

If innocence is the central claim of Luke’s Jesus, we cannot claim it for ourselves. We began the service by saying, “All glory, laud and honor,” and our shouts of “Crucify him” still rings in our ears. I know a man who will not participate in the reading of the narrated gospel because the thought of these words spoken within an hour of each other caused him so much pain. I believe he was referring to the interior dissonance we all experience when we look on silently at protestors being arrested for civil disobedience, when we change the channel on hearing of another young man being shot for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Jesus’ presence was more than an inconvenience for the authorities; he had become such a liability to the religious and occupying leaders that his death was an inevitability. But it does not absolve Pilate, the Sanhedrin or any of the crowd of complicity, a thought that should be painful to all of us.

That is why his final words are both ironic and hopeful, because they are addressed to God alone. To say, “into your hands I commend my spirit,” is to nullify the sentence pronounced on him. The authority that Jesus recognizes is God’s alone. He transforms a moment of abject suffering into a scene of redemption, not only for himself but for all those around him. It is the second line of the psalm, the one he does not quote, that tells the truth about this act of self-offering: “for you have redeemed me, O God of truth”. If there is redemption today it is in a suffering God who loved those around him too much to be bound by the opportunism of the authorities.

So we are caught today between political expediency, of power routinely used to crush those who would resist it, and the love of a Son for the Father. It is this caughtness which we will see playing out around us through the next week. It is characteristic of the gospel to ask questions of us that refuse easy answers, why our salvation is dependent upon a man whose love can face down the relentless cruelty of authority. But that love doesn’t need our understanding. It needs our willingness to walk this week’s journey, our own crosses in our grip, transformed by our willingness to journey with one whose suffering we share, at whose love we can only wonder.