

A sermon preached on Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT. by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Mark 11:1-11. Isaiah 50:4-9a. Psalm 31:9-16. Philippians 2:5-11. Mark 14:1-15:47

I was very surprised by two conversations I had at a meeting yesterday. I met a man in a wheelchair with Parkinson's Disease. He told me that Parkinson's was one of the best things that ever happened in his life because it slowed him down and made him much more aware of God's presence with him every moment. He said he was much more at peace with life and had a deeper trust in God than every before.

After the meeting I met another man who'd been very quiet during the meeting. He told me that he doesn't talk much, but that he'd had seven cancer surgeries and he had spent the previous day in the Sloan Kittery Cancer clinic. He said, I don't talk much about this because I don't want people to think I'm telling a "poor me" story, because that's not where I'm at. Cancer has changed my outlook on life and given me a whole different understanding of what's important and what is not important. I have a deep sense of gratitude for little ordinary things now, then I never had before. And I'm very much at peace with whatever happens. I guess I just trust God more.

Have you noticed that even with our very best intelligence and experience, we human beings don't really understand the mystery of our lives? Sometimes things we thought were good news turn out to be bad news. Sometimes things we thought were bad news turn into good news. This is what happened in the lives of the two men I spoke with yesterday and in the lives of people in both the Palm Sunday Gospel and the Good Friday Gospel that we just read.

The Palm Sunday crowd was excited to walk alongside Jesus, waving palm branches and singing Psalms of praise to God. The Psalm they sang as they walked was Psalm 118 which they normally sang as they walked to the Temple in Jerusalem on Passover and other major Holy Days of the year. "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven."

Hosanna is not just a word of praise, like the word Alleluia. Hosanna is the combination of two Aramaic words that meant "Save us". This cry of "hosanna", "Oh God come to save us", expressed the longing hopes of that first Palm Sunday crowd. They were sick and tired of being sick and tired, worn out by the occupation of the Roman Army and Roman taxes, feeling like foreigners in their own country and feeling helpless to improve their daily lives because of the powerful control of the Roman Empire. So, their cry of Hosanna was their joyful, traditional liturgical song praise to God, their Good Shepherd and King. At the same time it was also the aching plea of their battered hearts: "O God save us from the nightmare of our country and our lives!" They longed for God to change their situation.

I wonder, what is the longing cry of your heart this morning? All of us carry our own fears and struggles, our concerns about loved ones, about our church, our nation and world. We are invited to join the Palm Sunday crowd and bring both our praise to God and the longing cries of our hearts to Jesus here this morning.

Every year at Passover, there were Psalm singing crowds walking toward the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. But this year, residents of the city noticed something dramatically different about one group of pilgrims walking toward the Temple. What was different was, as they were singing and waving palm branches, they were focusing on Jesus, walking alongside Jesus as he rode on a donkey. They even put their outer garments on the ground in front of him, honoring him.

It was clear that many of those singing and walking with Jesus were beginning to think that this Jesus might be God's Messiah. He might be the one God promised to send to bring freedom from Rome. As they cried out "Hosanna, Save us", they were crying out to God, and crying out to Jesus, with a deep sense of longing and hope, with a sense of urgency. Now is the time, Jesus! Come save us from the oppression of the Romans!

So that first Palm Sunday procession was a risky walk, with political implications for the marchers. The Roman soldiers could come to arrest them for disturbing the peace. But these walkers took the risk of demonstrating their hope and longing that God would work through Jesus to be their spiritual and political Savior. Yet, for all their enthusiasm, the rag tag Palm Sunday procession was probably not too large and threatening, otherwise the Roman soldiers would have arrested them.

Ironically, at the same time Jesus and his small, Psalm singing, palm waving crowd were walking into the south side of Jerusalem, Pilate, the Roman Governor was marching into Jerusalem from the north, as he did every Passover. Pilate was riding on a huge war horse, in full military regalia, surrounded by a legion of 3,000 Roman soldiers wearing red and gold armor, marching in lock step as they entered the city gates. It was a military parade designed to demonstrate Roman military power and to intimidate the large influx of Jewish worshippers who came to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

In stark contrast, Jesus enters Jerusalem riding an ordinary donkey, surrounded by a joyful, Psalm singing crowd of ordinary people. Roman soldiers in full military regalia with swords and spears vs. ordinary folks singing Psalms and waving palm branches. Roman power and arrogance vs. Jesus' seeming ordinariness and humility.

Yet that palm-waving crowd dared to believe that Jesus might possibly be the Messiah God promised to send. They pictured Jesus defeating the powerful Romans, taking control, and making Israel great again, ruling not only over Israel, but over the whole world as God's Messiah. Israel would once again become a rich and powerful world empire, like when David and Solomon were their kings.

What happened to these hopes and expectations of the Palm Sunday crowd? Just five days later, their hopes and dreams were crushed on Friday, as Jesus was nailed to the cross. They expected victory. What they experienced at the cross felt like defeat. Instead of Jesus defeating the Romans, the Romans had crucified Jesus. Life did not turn out as they expected.

Their high of Palm Sunday expectations turned into the lowest Good Friday point of their lives. They were overwhelmed with despair. All their hopes were as dead as Jesus. And yet, by Sunday, they would begin to discover that on the other side of the dead end of the cross and tomb, Jesus had risen and opened up a whole new life for him, for them, for the whole world.

You see, the crowd misunderstood Palm Sunday. It was not the high point of political and military success they imagined. And the crowd misunderstood Good Friday. It was not the hopeless dead end they imagined.

Both gospels remind us that often we do not see life as God sees it. From our human perspective God has a way of taking what we think is success and revealing its emptiness. And God takes what looks like failure and turns it into a redemptive pathway to new life.

All this tells us something about what God is like. God is humble. God comes to us in the disguise of our ordinary daily lives. Like the Palm Sunday crowd, we often ask and expect God to

come like a powerful Roman military general to take control of the world and make everything right according to our standards. But God comes as a vulnerable baby in a manger, God comes riding on a donkey surrounded by a rag tag group of ordinary people waving palms, and God comes as what appears to be an ordinary man crucified on a cross by the powerful injustice of the Romans.

What might God want to teach you and me this morning through the Palm Sunday crowd and the Good Friday crowd?

Perhaps God wants to remind us that we also do not really understand the mystery of life as clearly as we think we do. Perhaps we also need to learn again that the humble, all-powerful love of God comes to us in both the highs and the lows of our lives. We have a grand picture of God's greatness, yet we often are blind to the God who comes to us in the little things of our daily lives, including in our joys and failures, even in our darkest Good Friday times.

The Palm waving crowd might ask us this morning: What causes you the greatest joy in your life right now? What gives you a sense of security and hope? Is it our nation? Is it your health? Your family? Your investments and financial situation? Your hobbies and friends?

It is good to offer our thanks and praise to God for all the blessings of our lives. Thanksgiving is always appropriate. At the same time the Palm waving crowd reminds us that we never know how long our greatest joys will last, from a human perspective. All of us, like the Palm waving crowd, are vulnerable to life's changes.

The Good Friday crowd might ask us this morning: What are the worst fears that haunt your life right now, as the crucifixion devastated them on Good Friday? What situations in your life, the lives of family and friends, what fears about our nation and world create anxiety and dread in you?

Perhaps the Good Friday crowd would remind us that our worst fears are never the end of the story. God works in mysterious and powerful ways to overcome the worst that evil, sin and death can do in our lives and in the world around us. What appears to our human eyes and understanding to be a hopeless dead-end situation may actually be a time of transition, a time of God's new beginnings on the other side of what appear to be dead ends.

I invite you to close your eyes and in the silence of our hearts let us talk with Jesus... Through the Palm Sunday and Good Friday crowds, how might Jesus be inviting you and me to change one or two of our attitudes and perspectives towards what is going on in our lives and in the world around us...?

O Christ, thank you for walking with us in the Palm Sunday highs and the Good Friday lows of our lives: help us to see the highs and lows of our lives from your larger perspective, and increase our trust in you, in the midst of things we fear and do not understand, through the power of your Holy Spirit at work within us and around us. Amen.