

The End of Normal

Today is Palm Sunday, and the beginning of Holy Week. We have gathered as the Church has gathered from time immemorial: with songs, prayers, and palm branches. What are we doing here? Why are we doing THIS? We hear two very different stories: a triumphal parade into Jerusalem, and a death march out to Golgotha. What do these two processions have to do with each other? Whether we know it or not, today marks not only the beginning of Holy Week, but for Jesus and his followers it was meant to be Independence Day, the beginning of the Kingdom of God on earth in real time. And so this day would also mark the beginning of the end – the end of Herod’s puppet kingdom, the end of Caesar’s cruel empire: the end of normal. Today we speak and hear about the DEMISE of kingdoms, but even so what Jesus proposed to replace Herod and Caesar would not be *anything* like whatever his followers were expecting. And THAT, would cost him the loss of his friends, his followers, and his life. So we hear about the end of normal in three ways, or rather in three kinds of story: in ritual, in scripture, and we hope – in our lives.

Why are we here with palms today? The earliest account of this ritual comes from a fourth century Spanish pilgrim to the Holy Land, Sister Egeria. Egeria recorded how the Christian community prayed there on this day. After the regular Sunday morning Eucharist, they would gather outside Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives, around 1 pm. For about 4 hours they would sing hymns, listen to scripture, and offer prayers (and you thought THIS service was long!). Around 5 pm the children would gather around the bishop, everyone would listen to the palm Gospel, and then they would process into the city singing: “Hosanna ... Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord.” They carried palm and olive branches, and processed to the Church of the Resurrection to sing vespers around the cross. Sr. Egeria’s pilgrimage story became so influential, that eventually the Holy Week traditions in Jerusalem were adopted through the whole Church. EGERIA’s Holy Week story became the CHURCH’s Holy Week story, told in ritual. As we wave our palm branches, we repeat that story – now for about 1700 years!

The rituals of Holy Week are special, unique. They only happen once a year. They are NOT normal, but rather *liturgical one-offs*. They are a SERIOUS interruption in how we normally gather and pray on a Sunday. In a ritual sense, the liturgies of Holy Week call us to attention, and tell us there are critically meaningful things going on this week.

What is that critical meaning? Why did those 4th century Christians gather with palms – why do we? The answer is found in another story: the Gospel. Today we heard Matthew’s version.

It includes the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, with the story of the palms. But this story, on this day, is always read with another: the story of Jesus' passion. Curious! Why do we listen to these two stories together? Why did Matthew include them both in his Gospel? He did it, and we continue to do it, because the very meaning of Jesus' life and ministry is at stake in this. The palms which were carried before him, and the PASSION HE CARRIED INSIDE HIMSELF, were part of the same thing: THE END OF NORMAL, AND THE BEGINNING OF A NEW KINGDOM. We often say that Jesus did not come to create an earthly kingdom, which is true. But what is also true that his kingdom did, and does, have real consequences in kingdoms of this world, especially for Christians.

For a few short, dramatic hours, the kingdom of heaven was made real on earth. That is what Palm Sunday commemorates. It is about Christ's power and authority in our lives *on earth*. Only on THAT day did Jesus allow others to exalt or openly acclaim him as a king. In all the other Gospel stories he rejects any attempt to glorify him: but NOT in this one. He was making a political statement, and issuing a public challenge: you see at the exact same time, and on the other side of town, Governor Pontius Pilate was entering through the Joppa Gate in a military parade. So not only did Jesus allow this public accolade, HE SET IT UP! He arranged for the donkey. He sent his disciples to retrieve it. He was definitely proclaiming something: THE END OF NORMAL, the beginning of God's Kingdom – and the end of Herod's, Pilate's, and Caesar's. Then we learn about the end of normal as we hear of his passion for truth, mercy, and forgiveness; a passion for things the status quo could not deliver. He had a passion that sought the well-being of others in real time, and real space, and at GREAT personal cost. That is why this story is the end of normal. When those branches welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, they inaugurated this new kingdom, a new era unlike anything we might be used to, and unlike anything that passes for normal in our affairs. The story of his sacrifice - of his PASSION for this new way of living - GIVES THE MEANING, to his triumph. Only HIS PASSIONATE LOVE reveals the meaning of these palms, but these palms also reveal that a real and new kingdom was coming into being. So what do we mean when we proclaim Jesus as king? What did Matthew's followers, and Egeria's companions mean? And more importantly, what does any of this mean today?

These liturgical acts commemorate those events, but they are more than memorials: they are sacraments! They can be a means of grace and transformation even today. Palm Sunday challenges us to think about our own commitment and responsibility for the kingdom Jesus that was inaugurated on that day so very long ago. He does not need to enter Jerusalem again. He does not need to die again. He does not NEED our symbols, and he did not die on the cross so WE could eternally SYMBOLIZE it! (A. Schmemmann) Christ is calling us into HIS PASSION – not just his death, but into his immense LOVE for life, for all creatures and the creation itself.

When we hold these palms, we are saying: ALL that we are, and all that we have, belong to this transforming PASSIONATE love. When we hold these palms we proclaim the END of the brutality that passes for NORMAL all around us. We proclaim the END of the very things that QUITE NORMALLY murdered Jesus. Things like fear, greed, and hypocrisy. Things like violence, panic, and arrogance. Still today: just men, women and children suffer and die from this kind of normalcy. Unless we believe in the end of THAT normalcy, in the heavenly power to confront and overcome unjust systems: we SHOULD NOT raise these branches up. Because when we raise up these branches, we are saying there is no kingdom, no place on earth, and no state of normal, that cannot be radically touched, healed, and redeemed. And so, normal is at an end in the kingship of Jesus, because his DEATH confronted and exposed the lie of normalized, systematized brutality. Jesus exposed the cruelty and the ignorance, which exploits who and what God loves, and to which we have become accustomed.

We often weave beautiful crosses out of these palms, but these branches need to be woven into the fabric of our lives. That is why we are here today with our palms. We are continuing to weave the stories of Jesus, Matthew, and Egeria into our own lives - to proclaim a redeeming way out of 'normal.' We are here to follow Jesus in touching the pain, healing the hurt, and confronting the alienation that is part of OUR story, our neighbor's, and the world's. THAT is why we are here today. That is what these palms mean. Hold them to your heart and bring the love of Christ out into the world that Jesus loved with a passion beyond all telling.

References

Egeria. *The Pilgrimage of Egeria: A Fourth Century Account by a Spanish Nun*.

Alexander Schmemmann. *Holy Week: A Liturgical Explanation For the Days of Holy Week*. Department of Religious Education. Orthodox Church of America, pp., 7-14.